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BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 40

THE ELECTRIC EYE

or Helped by the X-Rays

A DAZZLING RADIANCE
SPRANG AFLAME INSIDE THE
CROOKE'S TUBE



BY
WELDON W. COBB

"Let me go!" wriggled Dick. "You impostor and cheat! Blind! You can see as well as myself."

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

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THE ELECTRIC EYE;

OR,

Helped By the X-Ray.

By WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER I.

"BUSINESS FROM THE START."

"Hi, there!"

"Look out!"

"My! but he's headed for a plunge!"

"Is the queer old party blind, or daft?"

In four seconds four boys shot out the excited ejaculations.

They were seated on a bench outside a shed at the edge of the bustling Michigan town of Decatur.

Once it seemed to have been a blacksmith shop, admirably located to catch highway trade, for five roads came to a point before it. One of these was narrow, and running up a slant seemed to end at its apex.

Along this had come a bicyclist well on in years, going at a good rate of speed, and completely absorbed in thought.

As, instead of taking one of the main roads, he spun along that which every village boy knew ended abruptly at the creek, the four lads uttered the warning shouts.

They came too late. The rider seemed about as impervious to the distracted clamor as the big, bobbing parcel tied to the bicycle. He went on, up and—over.

"What's happened?" called out a fifth boy, appearing at the door of the little shop.

"Wheel—creek road—he's struck!"

Tang—splash!

The sound echoed with dreadful distinctness just as eight pairs of juvenile heels skimmed the rise.

The boy left behind, bearing a hammer in his hand and wearing a leather lap apron, promptly followed in the wake of his vanished friends.

At the top of the rise he halted. At its base was the creek, and two of the rescuing party were dragging the bicycle from its murky depths.

Two others were helping up its mud-streaked, water-soaked rider.

"Hurt?" asked the aproned spectator, anxiously.

"No, only jarred," began the reply, when the old man wiggled up his head, and muttered vaguely:

"Bike?"

"Your bicycle?" questioned his right-hand supporter.

"Yes."

"They're bringing it."

"Fix."

"Get it fixed?"

The drooping, dripping man nodded.

"Ah, we'll do that!" was the effusive promise. "That's what we're here for, eh, boys? And what Dick Barry can't do to a wheel isn't discovered yet."

The enthusiastic orator waved his hand toward the aproned artisan, Dick Barry in question, and the little shop beyond.

The old man, who had "ducked and turned in" so abruptly, hurried along as he observed the bench promising rest for his limping limbs, and the sign above it guaranteeing prompt attention for his battered wheel.

BRAVE AND BOLD.

It was a neatly-lettered inscription, and it read:

"BICYCLE AND GENERAL REPAIRING,
D. I. Co."

"D. I. Co.," he repeated. "Pretty big name for a rather small institution. What is it, anyway?"

"It's us," volunteered his left-hand supporter. "Decatur Improvement Company. We're the Co., stock organization, regular officers, and all that."

"Oh, I see. Five of you?"

"Just. Dick's the president. The pale fellow helping him is Van Merton, treasurer. I'm Tom Green, vice-president. These other two, Frank and Elmer Winston, are directors," and the speaker swelled up at a sense of his official dignity.

"Not a bad idea," observed the man, "provided you all help as well as officer, and have work enough to keep you busy."

"Work!" cried the irrepressible Tom. "Say, give Dick credit for the scheme, but don't think we stand around with our hands in our pockets. He and Van are the handy men, and run things here, but Frank can drum——"

"Oh, you run a band, too?"

"No, drum up trade, I mean. Decatur is a pretty big place, and there's twenty villages around. He brings in keys to make, scissors and knives to grind, lawn mowers to fix. Elmer yonder is the glazier. He can give you a pane in a jiffy! As to me, I sell the output."

"Of what?" asked the auditor, on a broad smile.

"Over there," and Tom jerked his thumb back of the shop, "is the abandoned truck garden of the man Dick used to live with. We run it now. As to the shop, you'd be surprised to know what lots of bicycle and general repairs we attend to, what heaps of hammock hooks and screens we turn out. You know the lake is right over there? The hotels are crowded with tourists, and there's mighty few we haven't sold a natural wood souvenir cane to. Why, sir! in the last month we've brought the joint bank account up to——"

"Tom, you're talking too much," muttered Frank Winston.

"I declare! it braces me like a whiff of boyhood memory to strike something new and ambitious," observed the man. "What an assortment of tools!" he continued, looking into the shop. "A regular forge—by the way, what have you done with my parcel?"

Dick was mending a spoke, while Van held the wheel in a clamp. He looked up vaguely.

"Your parcel, sir?"

"Yes. It was tied to the bicycle."

"What was it?"

"A—but you wouldn't understand the technical name. It was a glass receptacle, made at the works over near Blake. I have spent a day there getting it done just right. I hope it isn't broken."

"I am positive nothing was attached to the wheel when it was brought in here."

"Too bad, that."

"It must have fallen in the water. We'll find it floating or sticking in the mud," pronounced the buoyant Tom.

He and the Winstons started away. It was half an hour before they returned, and by that time Dick had got the bicycle fixed, Van had disappeared, and its owner was interestedly questioning the young artisan about the company of which he seemed the working and thinking head.

"I declare, I'm vexed!" exclaimed the man as the searchers returned empty handed.

"No trace of it, sir," reported Tom. "It may have sunk."

"It was hollow."

"Or floated away, or, what's more likely, got smashed."

"Who'd smash it?"

"Well, there's a hard lot live over near the gully—the Carter crowd. I saw three of them along the creek, and as they are generally pelting stray cows, boys and windows, if they caught sight of your glass dish, or whatever it was, biff! they've made hash of it."

The old man looked disappointed and disturbed. He consulted his watch.

"How much for repairing the bicycle?" he asked, and paid the amount. "This puts me out considerably," he went on. "The lost article is something very essential to some tests I am making, and I cannot afford the time to direct the making of another immediately."

"We will take a further look for it," promised Dick.

"I shall be at the depot till the three o'clock train arrives. If you find it by then try and catch me. If later, here is my card—John Marcy—everybody in Detroit knows me. Send or bring it. I'll be glad to give you twenty-five dollars for your trouble."

"Whew!" whistled Tom, "twenty-five dollars! Why, that would bring our pile up to——"

"You talk like a man with a wooden leg!" nudged Frank, impatiently. "Why don't you tell everything you know?"

As Mr. Marcy started away on his wheel Dick took off his apron.

"You tend shop till we look after the lost package, Tom. We won't be gone long," he said.

As they came in sight of the shop again an hour later, they observed its custodian pacing the plot in front, tossing something up conjuror-fashion.

"Hello!" chirped the effervescent Tom. "Didn't you find the package? I knew you wouldn't; but here's good luck to offset it;" and he slapped two silver dollars into Dick's hand.

"What's this?" inquired the latter.

"Money, isn't it?"

"Yes, but where did you get it?"

"Well," announced Tom, proudly, "I've done a pretty good stroke of business during your absence. It takes me to run the shop!"

"What?"

"You know the old soap box we've kept filling with fragments and fillings of brass and copper?"

Dick nodded, but with a slight start.

"You don't mean——" he began.

"I sold the old truck to a passing junk peddler."

"Sold it?"

"Exactly."

"Box and all?"

"Oh, I threw in the box. Why, Dick, what's the matter?"

Dick was betraying manifest emotion; his eyes were full of excitement.

"Who did you sell it to?" he asked.

"I never saw the man before."

"Tom, you've made a terrible mistake if you only knew it. Quick! which way did the man go?"

"I declare," observed Tom, blankly, "I never noticed."

Dick uttered a groan of dismay.

"Tom Green," he said, choking up palpably, "I'm afraid you've done me the worst turn of my life!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DOUBLE LOSS.

Tom's good-natured face grew long as a shingle, while his companions looked startled.

"What have you been doing now?" snapped Frank.

"Trying to turn brass into silver, but I don't get any credit for it," blurted Tom.

Dick was out in the road scanning the branching highways with unmistakable anxiety.

"There was something in that box——" began Frank.

"Of course there was—old junk."

"No; something else. Look how worried Dick is. Tom Green, your name just fits you. If you had some of the rubber out of your neck and the wheels out of your head, you might make an average boy in time."

"That so!" flared up Tom. "Well, calling a cockroach a canary don't put feathers on the insect, or you'd know the difference between a whiffle tree and a tug."

"Booh!"

"Bah!"

"It's nothing you could help, I guess, Tom," sighed Dick, returning to the group. "I had something hidden in that box."

"Valuable?" gulped the distressed Tom.

"I fancy so."

"What?"

"I can't waste time telling now. Was the peddler driving?"

"Yes; had a white horse. Can't we overtake him?"

"We can try. There's four roads. We'll each take one."

"And if we catch him?"

"Get what you'll find lying under the pile of junk. Why, where's Van?"

"He's not around. Hasn't been for an hour," exclaimed Elmer. "Dick," he continued, seriously, "what's ever come over him lately? He acts fidgety, morose, scared."

"Oh, nonsense."

"He does. I don't want to say anything against him, for he's your friend, but there's something wrong. He shies away from all of us. I caught him crying yesterday, and Frank says he saw him with a most disreputable old fellow in the woods this morning."

"And I saw him talking with the Carter crowd," put in Tom.

Dick's brow clouded, but he tried to dissipate the prejudices of his companions.

"Van's all right, boys," he insisted, "and as to these suspicious occurrences, I'll have a talk with him to-night. I think myself he's not quite as chirp as usual. Maybe, though, he's just city-sick—pining for a sight of the electric lights and the tall houses again. But don't waste time. Frank, you take the village road; Elmer, you follow the ridge highway. I'll go west, and you, Tom—some one must mind the shop, you do that."

"There's another road. I know the peddler best. I want to help, too!" Tom protested, excitedly; but Dick's form was disappearing on the trail of the junk dealer who had suddenly set the affairs of the Decatur Improvement Company all topsy-turvy.

"It's nonsense about anything being wrong with Van," soliloquized Dick. "I've trusted him, and he's treated me like a brother. The boys never liked it, my making him treasurer, but I knew the confidence would lift him up wonderfully, and he's the hardest worker of the lot."

Still, Dick's face showed uneasiness. Practically he knew little of Van. A year previous, penniless and sick, Van had come from that great hiding place of humanity, the city. Pity had led to

friendship. Dick got him work, and when the great company scheme sprang into existence Van's vim and industry did so much to help it on that Dick felt rewarded for his efforts.

That scheme was the outcome of a series of circumstances that may be briefly related.

Dick was an orphan. Forced to work for a living, for three years he had found a home with the former occupant of the house just behind the repair shop.

Old Aaron Bird was a miserly, secretive man, but Dick got along very well with him. Periodically he would go away on long, mysterious journeys. Then he would settle down to raising garden truck.

Dick helped him, but was getting dissatisfied with the ambitionless life, when Bird was taken sick.

During his illness he commended all Dick's careful attentions, and quite raised his hopes by insisting that, should he die, he would be well taken care of.

He did die, but, aside from a few sticks of furniture, Bird left the world as poor as he had entered it.

Dick was disappointed. Boylike, he valued his devotion to the old man's interests; boylike, he had built up many opulent dreams on his munificent promises.

All this, however, acted as a spur to Dick's ambition. He saw his mistake in drudging for a pittance. He would be his own master henceforth—and he cast his eyes about for some enterprise that was fitted to a bright, energetic boy.

He found it at his very side. The abandoned blacksmith shop could be had for the asking. Bird had been something of a tinker, had left an antiquated but useful kit of tools, and had taught Dick how to handle them.

Bicycling was the rage in Decatur and the surrounding towns. Summer visitors to near resorts brought their wheels with them. Here was the opening field.

Dick could hardly realize how it came about, but a month after Mr. Bird's death the company was a settled fact. He had gathered about him four stanch friends, and inside of ninety days the little corporation was booming.

Of his helpers, the two Winston boys lived with a stepfather who gave them indifferent care; Tom had a good home with a married brother, but longed for independence. It was a proud hour when, at their second regular meeting, the treasurer reported one hundred and fifty dollars in the bank, and sanguine prospects ahead.

"When we get five hundred dollars!" that was the unfinished warcry of the group. They had a purpose in view which they lisped to nobody. They were not tugging and toiling for passing needs alone, and they were daily getting nearer, nearer to that coveted D notch that was to lift them into an experience worth living for.

All this time Dick felt that he was cheated out of something. He was sure Bird must have left money or its equivalent, but in what shape or where secreted he could not guess.

His confidence in its existence, in his right to it, remained as bright as ever. Some day it would materialize, and he pinned all his faith on what he had hidden in the bottom of that old soap box, and that was the reason he was posting in hot haste in pursuit of it.

"I must get that back, surely," he told himself. "It's a misfit, a riddle, a quandary, but—it's important."

Dick made several spurts along the winding road. At a final curve he still found no trace of the peddler.

"He couldn't have come this way," decided Dick. "What's that?"

BRAVE AND BOLD.

He put up his hand to his cheek. Something had struck it, stinging like a hornet.

"A stone!" he exclaimed, as a sharp-pointed pebble rebounded to his feet. "Who threw it? You sneak!"

Pain made Dick mad, and memory sent words of hot indignation to his lips.

A harsh, hoarse laugh directed his attention to a loutish fellow a few rods from the road, swinging a slung-shot.

"Keep your hat on, old man," advised this individual, coolly. "No one was pegging at you."

Dick did not believe the statement, and angrily regarded the rowdy leader of the Carter gang.

"Kid Carter," he spoke, "I've been looking for you for some time."

"I'm usually hereabouts."

"Was you 'hereabouts' last Thursday night?"

"I don't think."

"No, you was up at our shop."

"That's a warm proposition. However, I get against its pass up. What of it?"

"And we missed two hammers the next morning."

Big Kid Carter swaggered forward and protruded his bull neck loweringly.

"Throw that into me again if you dare," he said.

"I say you stole two of our hammers."

"Sonny," growled Kid, "you've struck the wrong bunch for bluster. Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"It don't scare me."

"I'm going to step on your face. Get your holder on the jump, for I'm quick as powder, and when I begin at the first card I go clear through the deck. I've been spilin' for a good scrimmage for right smart of a while. There's one of your hammers. There's the other!"

Kid made two saucy passes. Then something happened. The lawlessness and depredations of the Carter gang were too fresh in Dick Barry's mind for him to show much mercy. He was strung up to the right tension at just the right moment. The crowd must have a lesson, its leader must be subdued, or they would ride rough-shod over the company.

Kid's tactics were fisticuffs. These Dick deftly parried. His expertness all lay in quick grabs and throws. Kid was in the air most of the time. Then, a great breathless, bellowing booby, he lay where he was flung, declaring his arm broken and vowing deadly vengeance.

"You keep away from our quarters, or you'll get worse," observed Dick, turning from the spot. "Hello!"

He had observed a glittering object propped against a tree stump.

"It's glass, with some wrapping paper about it," commented Dick, advancing. "Why, I believe it's Mr. Marcy's package. A glass receptacle, he said, and what a queer contrivance! This was what Kid was pegging at as a target when the stone struck me. He must have found it in the creek."

"You just look out!" came floating down the road ahead of a big stone. "We've got it in for you—money—shop—Van Merten."

Dick only faintly caught the last threat of the vanquished bully. For a second the allusion to Van bothered him. Then he became absorbed in examining the glass receptacle.

It was quite bulky and round, but it had four conelike protuberances, in which wires were imbedded. Dick could only guess that it was some testing apparatus.

He got back to the shop to find Tom awaiting him impatiently.

"It's all right," he chirped.

"What's all right?"

"The soap box."

"You got it back?"

"No; but we know who the peddler is. Frank ran across a farmhouse where he stopped to water the horse, and the man said he runs a scrapyard in Detroit. Levi Cohen, 22 Peninsula Street. The Winston boys left word and went home."

Dick felt much relieved. It would be some trouble to visit the city, but he must do so at once.

"If you'll deliver some saws I've filed for Beggs, the butcher," he said, "you needn't come back till morning."

"You think the soap box business is all right?"

"I'm sure of that. Look, I've found the lost bicycle package."

"I'm dead glad. What a queer affair! It's too late to catch the train, though."

"Yes, but as I've got to go to the city to look after the box, I'll take this to Mr. Marcy personally. Has Van shown up yet?"

"Not yet."

Dick looked his dissatisfaction. Then, as Tom started away, he replaced the glass carefully in paper, consulted a time-table, and planned to catch the seven o'clock train for Detroit.

He had some chisels to grind and a lock to put in order, and this, and changing his clothes, took two hours.

For the fourth or fifth time Dick started for the door to see if the mysteriously absent Van was coming, when a noise like some one prodding the side of the shed with a stick halted him.

Footsteps accompanied the sound. Then they ceased, and then a summons came on the half-open door, more like a bang than a knock.

"Is this a house? Is anybody within?" called out a gruff, querulous voice.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE DARK.

Dick stepped forward to see who his visitor might be, when a big, thick cane came poking through the doorway.

Blundering after it was a great raw-boned man. He stumbled over the threshold and nearly fell.

"Hold on!" directed Dick. "What's the matter?"

"Ah! some one is here? I am blind."

The blinking eyes and irresolute progress proved the assertion. "I've seen him before—where? where?" Dick murmured, trying to recognize the sinister features.

"Is this the old blacksmith shop?" asked the stranger.

"Yes."

"Where's the proprietor, Grimm?"

"Gone out of business. Myself and others are running a tinkering place here."

"Eh? You do locksmithing and all that like Grimm?"

"Just the same."

"I've a job for you, then."

"I'm in something of a rush—" began Dick, remembering the train.

"Oh, don't think I'm asking charity because I'm blind. I've got money. You get some tools and come with me. I'll pay well. Ough—ough!"

"I know him!"

Dick uttered the words convincingly. The minute the man broke into a deep chest cough, too peculiar to be forgotten once heard, his vivid memory flashed up.

He now recalled the fact that one dark night about eighteen months since he had admitted this same individual to a closeted conference with his dead employer.

Three months later, on another like moonless night, the same person had come again.

Only at those times he wore more hair on his face—he was not blind.

"It's the same man," soliloquized Dick, "but it's queer he's blind now. Bird had mysterious dealings with him. I'd better say nothing, but go with him and see what he's up to. Yes, sir," Dick spoke, aloud, "I'll go with you. Fit a key, is it?"

"No, cut some heavy padlocks and pry open an iron door."

"Is it far?"

"Not very."

The blind man allowed Dick, who had slung a tool satchel over one arm, to lead him outside.

"Face me west," he directed. "Now, then, start me on the north road along the creek footpath."

"Why, what are you making for in that unfrequented direction?" Dick was surprised into exclaiming.

"Never mind; I know."

Dick did not like the man's face. It was coarse and cunning. There was, too, a brutal suggestion about the great, sprawling hands.

During nearly half an hour's tramp he did a heap of thinking. Anything that referred to Bird interested him, and the reappearance of the mysterious midnight visitor, the hint at forced locks, suggested a possible mystery.

The blind man would turn his face west. Allowing the dying day glow to play across his sightless orbs, he seemed more and more satisfied as some instinct told him that night was fast approaching.

"Oh, it's here!" exclaimed Dick, as his companion, sounding trees, the path and old wrecks of sheds and fences, halted at a heap of ruined masonry.

"Yes, if this is the cellar of the old burned brewery?"

"It is."

All that was left of the dilapidated landmark was the cellar walls. Over a part of them flooring covered with plaster and bricks still remained.

It was an uninviting spot. Dick remembered its creek wall as a favorite fishing place of Bird's, but it had never attracted himself or the boys.

"Pass along to where the old board door used to be," directed the blind man.

"It's here still. We're right in front of it," announced Dick. "Wait, it's hard to push open. Ugh! damp and dark enough!"

"Isn't it?" cried his companion, briskly. "Ah, that's good. Come on, hurry up! Here's the very spot. What are you waiting for?"

"What am I waiting for?" cried Dick, lost in amazement as the blind man darted forward, and his voice came from way across the cellar. "I can't see before my face. You must know the place mighty well to go ahead so fast."

"Me? Aha! Yes," chuckled the man. "Don't. Oh, can't see without a light?"

"Well, hardly."

Dick had taken a candle from the satchel. Lighting this, he crossed to where the blind man stood. The latter shaded his brow and quivered as if the reflection pained his eyes.

"Here's a lot of old boards," he said, groping over a slanting heap.

"That's right."

"Move them away. What do you find?"

"An iron door hinged into the brick work."

"And closed?"

"With two large padlocks."

"Didn't I say that!" cried the man, eagerly. "Good boy! A spry fellow like you can soon open it, eh?"

"That's what I came for."

What the door hid, how the blind man came to know so much about it, Dick puzzled his brain to surmise, but he guessed that some one, discovering a safe hiding place among the ruins, had utilized it.

"Break, smash—the quickest way!" urged the blind man.

Dick finally shattered the padlocks. Then he inserted a thin wedge into the rust-filled door.

"Open!" cried the blind man, exultantly. "Ah! that creak's music. Good boy! I'll pay you double. Blow out the light, and let's see—"

"See! How can we see in the darkness? How queer you act! Stand back till I pull the door clear open. It's a safe vault. Why! there's an old trunk in there."

"Yes, yes!"

"A little hair trunk. It's—it's one old Aaron Bird used to have! I've seen it a hundred times. It disappeared before he died."

"What do you know about Bird? No interference! Hands off! It's mine!"

The blind man groped and floundered, but Dick was so excited that he paid little attention to him.

His surmises were correct. This old friend of Bird's had reappeared on some business associated with their former acquaintanceship.

"Have I found Bird's hiding place?" breathed Dick. "It looks so. Get back," he ordered, almost sticking the candle into the blind man's face, and the latter retreated with a pained cry. "I've some interest in this affair myself."

"You—you!"

"Yes, I'm the boy who lived with Bird, and he practically left me everything he possessed."

"Not this, though!" snarled Dick's companion. "You're that boy? Then I'm betrayed! You're going to cheat a helpless blind man, are you?"

"No, I'm going to see what's in that trunk. I've as much right as you."

"You have—you have? I'm his old partner. I'm—"

Slam! With a jerk Dick brought the trunk to the room floor. Its loose corner flopped aside.

"Empty!" he cried; "so you've got excited for nothing?" But his own spirits sank disappointedly. "No, here's a stick—studded with brass nails and tipped with a feather."

"Bird's divining rod! That's mine, anyway. But I don't believe the trunk's empty. You're cheating me. Blow out the light so I can see."

"What!" shouted Dick, bewildered at the extraordinary statement; "so you can see?"

Puff!

Out went the candle and blackness supervened. Dick could faintly make out the doorway across the cellar against the night light just haunting the darkness that had settled down outside.

A roar of rage from the blind man, an instinctive feeling that he was springing through the air toward him, made Dick retreat.

"Empty?" screamed the man. "Only the divining rod? Give me that, then. I don't believe it! There was something else you grabbed—a paper, money!"

"No. Why, you ruffian! do you want to kill me?"

One of Dick's hammers came whizzing past his head. He put through the door. Flying after him came the blind man.

Blind no longer! As Dick ran, he made a startling discovery.

BRAVE AND BOLD.

Dodge as he might, speed as he might, his pursuer darted in his wake true as a bloodhound, keen-visioned as a cat.

He was a whining piece of helplessness no longer, but an infuriated madman now.

"Drop what you took—you got something, you wouldn't run if you hadn't!" he shouted. "That was Bird's cache, and he wouldn't lock up emptiness. Boy, I will kill you if you don't stop!"

Dick was scared. The sinister translation from sightlessness to vivid powers of vision had something uncanny about it.

He ran till he was blocked by a rickety shed. To get beyond it he vaulted the low roof, one slant of which overhung the river.

Creak—crack—the boards gave under his flying feet.

Snap—smash—several parted to splinters, as after him pounced his ruthless pursuer.

Flop! Straddling the quivering roof-tree, Dick was grabbed and jerked flat, and his captor tumbled flat in landing him.

Glaring into one another's faces, there they lay panting.

"Boy," hissed the blind man, with horrible ferocity, "you've run for something—you got something I didn't see!"

"See!" gasped Dick.

"Or you know about my partner's affairs what I don't know. Confess, or I vow I'll drag you back by the heels to the old vault and shut you in! I'm a desperate man!"

"Let me go!" wriggled Dick. "You impostor and cheat! Blind! You can see as well as myself. Ugh! turn away that glaring eyeball!"

"See?" chuckled the man. "In the daytime—not a glimmer; in the darkness—like a cat, a ferret, an eagle! They call me the Lightning Bug. Boy, I am a felinoctist!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE ELECTRIC EYE.

A felinoctist.

Dick Barry knew what that meant. He had read of such freaks—an anomaly, a misfit of nature, in the present case a monster.

To this man daylight was a closed page, but the blackest night was an open book, and, like some beast of prey, his powers were keenest when honest men slept.

His falcon-like fingers almost pierced Dick's shrinking flesh.

"Tell! tell!" he roared. "You sneaked something from the trunk."

"This old stick, yes. Don't!" shrieked Dick, as, grinding his teeth, the wretch with a flat-sided sweep bore his head down crushingly.

Then he gave himself a hunch upward to get astride the roof-tree, and the structure rocked crazily.

There followed a little creak and a great snap. Without further warning the rotted rafter broke apart.

The structure split in two. The right slant followed a natural momentum and went crashing to the ground, tearing loose the grasp of the man, who was borne irresistibly on the other section in a contrary direction.

Dick landed half stunned, covered with tumbling timbers.

Sweeping aside the débris, his eyes dilated; the west half of the structure had gone over the bank.

"Gracious!" panted the appalled boy.

Where was the man? Dick's hands were scraped from wrists to tip, one ear was bleeding, two lumps were rising on his crown big as pigeons' eggs, but his anxiety was centered on his late assailant.

"He's gone into the river!" breathed Dick, aghast, watching the floating timbers; "he's sunk. How horrible!"

Dick felt so faint that he had to sit down. When he got up again his assailant had not appeared; he mechanically turned his steps in the direction of the shop.

He had rigged a home-made telephone apparatus the week before. One line ran to Tom's room, a square distant; the other connected with the attic of the Winston house.

In five minutes Dick had summoned his friends.

"What's up?" demanded Tom, entering first.

"Bet it's something about Van," prophesied Frank, noticing Dick's pale face.

"I've something to tell you, boys," announced Dick, and he related the adventure of the evening. His friends were for revisiting the scene of the night's occurrences at once.

Dick went with them to the old brewery cellar. The tools were gathered up, the trunk inspected curiously.

When they came to the ruined shed they found no trace of the blind man. All agreed that he must have been drowned. Dick came across the divining rod where he had dropped it.

"I'd keep that," advised Tom, as they got back to the shop. "I've heard great things about such."

"We must watch along the creek for signs of the blind man's body," said Dick. "Isn't it strange that Van don't show up? Now, boys, I've something to tell you. I shall take the morning train for the city."

"To return the glass thing and hunt up the box," nodded Tom.

"Exactly. Boys, I never explained what was hidden in the soap box, but I shall now. This blind man has set me on pins and needles again about Bird's affairs. He was certainly looking for something he fancied Bird had hidden."

"Why! Bird died poor as a church mouse," suggested Tom.

"I never believed that," dissented Dick, "for during his last illness he boasted of not having worked for nothing, and promised to leave me something."

"He was always promising, and getting something for nothing," declared Tom.

"The last day of his life," proceeded Dick, "I was fixing the front room. There was a hole in the plaster, and I had got the thin backboard of a picture frame and cut it to a size to fit the gap. This I had covered with glue. My idea was to press it against the laths and whitewash over it. I had placed it on a table near Mr. Bird's bed, all ready to apply, when some one knocked at the door. When I got back Bird was dead."

Dick's auditors fluttered with keen interest.

"It was not until the next day," continued Dick, "that I thought of the glued board again. Then I found it, and adhering to it was a sheet of writing paper."

"Glued there."

"Face down, dropped or blown on the wet glue. I tried to remove it, but it stuck smooth and firm. I damped and picked away one corner. What came off showed me that I would thus destroy writing on the other side."

"There was writing?"

"Exactly. Face down, it defied my ingenuity. And then I remembered something."

"What?"

"Bird had been writing when I last saw him. 'My will—you're provided for,' he insisted on telling me. I think he finished it, was taken with a bad spell, threw the sheet on the table, and—the glued board caught it face down. There's my story."

"Well!" commented Tom.

"Since then I have puzzled my head hours and hours to devise some way of reading it. I placed it in the bottom of the old soap box. That's why I'm so anxious to recover it, for, boys," de-

clared Dick, positively, "I am sure the writing tells something important, and since that blind man appeared to-night I am surer of it than ever."

There was a train at five in the morning. Tom stayed with Dick till then, suggesting a score of impracticable schemes for getting at the glued-down-writing after it was recovered.

When Dick reached Detroit he started at once for the junk shop of Levi Cohen.

Happening, however, to consult Mr. Marcy's card, he found that his residence lay directly in the way.

Dick had brought the glass receptacle with him. He located the Marcy home. The hour was early, but, upon naming his mission to a servant, he was admitted at once.

"Ah! you're the young president of the repair company?" greeted Mr. Marcy, genially; "and you've found the lost bicycle package, eh?"

"Yes, sir," and Dick tendered the parcel, which his host undid eagerly.

"You've done me a great favor," averred Mr. Marcy, "and I never paid out money more willingly," he continued, pressing the twenty-five dollars on Dick.

"Might I ask what that glass is?" inquired Dick.

"It's a Crookes tube, if you know what that is."

"No, sir, although I seem to have seen that term somewhere. A fixture to some electrical apparatus, isn't it?"

"Exactly. Let me show you, since you are interested. I am a glass broker, and quite an experimentalist, and like to dabble with these new discoveries."

Dick became engrossed as his obliging host led the way to a table holding a small dynamo, connected with electric wires outside.

From the dynamo two wires ran to a stand with a pole on it, and to the pole was attached an adjustable clamp.

Into this Mr. Marcy secured one tongue of the glass receptacle. Then he attached the wires running from pole and dynamo to the wires that were imbedded in the little spurs.

"I hope," he remarked, casually, "you didn't think it necessary to rout out of bed before daylight to get this to me?"

"Oh, no, sir," explained Dick. "I had another object in coming to the city--something I lost, like yourself."

"Ah, indeed?" and, while adjusting the apparatus, before Dick knew it the urbane old gentleman was possessed of his whole story.

He looked quite excited as Dick told of his queer predicament, with a paper of importance pasted face down on a thin board.

"Somehow," concluded Dick, "I feel as if some day I shall find a way to read that writing."

"Find it!" cried Mr. Marcy, betraying astonishing assurance. "My boy, it's found already!"

"Why, sir, what do you mean?" asked the startled Dick.

"What I say, young Mr. President. Everything seems to dovetail into good luck for you. You found the Crookes tube I lost, and just as I am going to show you what it's used for you tell of something you possess that comes exactly within its scope."

"You—you think there might be a way discovered for reading that hidden writing?" he ventured.

"I know it."

"By removing it? Sir, that can't be done; I tried it."

"No," was Mr. Marcy's remarkable statement; "by reading it through the board."

"Through the board!" exclaimed Dick. "Why, who could see through a board?"

"The electric eye of science!" almost shouted the excitable old

enthusiast. "Through twenty boards! My boy, find your glued paper, bring it here, and I promise to give you an exact photograph of its hidden face."

"Oh, sir!" fluttered Dick, "how can you do that?"

"I'll show you."

Over to the dynamo stepped Mr. Marcy. He pressed a switch. There was a swish, and then a vivid glare.

A dazzling radiance sprang afame inside the Crookes tube. Dick's eyes seemed blinded by its intensity.

"I will read your paper," declared Mr. Marcy, "with that."

"That?" murmured the petrified Dick.

"Yes, by the light of the greatest, grandest discovery of the nineteenth century--the X-rays!"

CHAPTER V.

A SHREWD CUSTOMER.

The X-rays.

Dazzled Dick Barry caught his breath sharply.

Aladdin's wonderful lamp was nothing to the one that now blinked at him and blinded him.

"You mean to say that you can read writing through a board?" he began, dubiously.

"With that Crookes tube--exactly," smiled the sanguine Mr. Marcy.

"But—"

"Through twenty boards! through a stone wall! through a steel safe, I hope and believe!" averred Dick's host, enthusiastically.

"I've heard of such things," murmured the dazed Dick, "but supposed they were fairy tales."

"Not at all."

"And if I find the junk dealer, and recover the board on which is pasted old Aaron Bird's last writing—"

"We'll read it like magic."

"But it's face down."

"The electric eye will search it out! Get it; bring it here. I'll promise to give you an exact photograph of every line it contains."

Dick stood wavering like some one half asleep, and his friend had to shake him to arouse him.

"Come, my boy," he spoke, urgently. "If what you told me is so, you'd better lose no time in getting on the track of that old soap box."

"My goodness—no!" ejaculated Dick, with a vivid start.

"Come right back."

"Soon as I find the peddler."

"That's it. We'll very quickly solve the enigma of that writing."

Dick got out on the street, rubbing his brow to dissipate the dreamy influence of the past marvelous ten minutes.

Then of a sudden the glorious sunlight of hope, good luck and energy burst from behind the haze of mystification and wonder, and he was his old brisk self again.

"Levi Cohen, No. 22 Peninsula Street," he soliloquized. "That's the first goal. Back to the X-rays—that's the second; read the writing—oh! if he only can find out, if after all there's anything in Bird's scrawl! Then, maybe, a whole pot of money, the company, success!"

Whatever success meant to most boys, it signified enough to the excited Dick to set his eyes sparkling like diamonds and his heels going like the wind.

It was almost incredible what Mr. Marcy had told him, and yet Dick knew that electricity had been doing some wonderful things of late.

That blinding glare certainly seemed intense enough to penetrate the darkest corner of Christendom, and he had a glimmer of

BRAVE AND BOLD.

some accompanying design that was to photograph the lines of writing it would shadow out.

"I must catch my bird before I cook him, though," reflected Dick, watching street signs and numbers. "Here we are—Peninsula Street."

He ran into it full tilt. It was in a crowded part of the city, and seemed to be the paradise of cheap truck peddlers, junkmen and the poorer classes generally, for dilapidated carts, windowless structures, rag and metal storerooms and squalid children were in general evidence on every hand.

No. 22 was a blank-fronted, closely-shuttered house, a story high. It might have been a bank for the way in which it was guarded.

Its proprietor listened to Dick's story.

"It's back in the yard; go and get it," he said, simply.

"The box?" breathed Dick, eagerly.

"Yes. I emptied out the stuff and threw the box on the kindling pile."

"And the package in the bottom?" pressed Dick, with anxiety.

"I noticed it, undid it, saw it was only a piece of board, and threw it along with the box."

"Where is the kindling heap?" fluttered Dick.

The man told him—just beyond a pile of iron pipes, and Dick darted forward.

He let out a yell that resembled the war-whoop of a wild Comanche Indian as he rounded the mountain of junk.

Plainly Dick saw the kindling heap described; plainly he saw seated astride a log and chopping wood on the same log in front of him one of the man's junk sorters, a boy about his own age.

The industrious worker had a big heap already accumulated. Its top showed splinters of the famous soap box reduced to kindling.

Held between his fingers on the log was the piece of wood that had reposed in the soap box—the paper-pasted board that had led Dick such a wild, willful chase.

"Stop!" yelled Dick.

The chopper apparently did not hear him.

He poised the hatchet, and in another second its blade would descend.

Twenty feet lay between Dick and fate, Dick and his hopes, Dick and the precious secret that was to have tested the accuracy and ability of the wonderful X-rays.

Dick uttered a second ringing yell. Then he made a spring that carried him through the air like an arrow.

And the fate of old Aaron Bird's secret trembled in the balance.

CHAPTER VI.

CUP AND LIP.

Down came the hatchet.

"Stop! stop! stop!" screamed the frantic Dick.

His eyes were bolting, his breath came hissing, his nerves were tingling like shaken wires.

Every thought, hope and energy were centered on the rescue of that little piece of board upon which was glued what Dick believed to be old Aaron Bird's will.

The hatchet fell.

On one side dropped half the piece of wood. The impervious splitter retained hold of the remainder to give it another whack.

A cyclone of action and anguish at that moment, Dick reached him. Pell mell he pounced upon him indiscriminately.

The kindling chopper went forward, the hatchet flew from his hand. He uttered a piercing yell as Dick came on top of him and bore him down flat as a pancake.

"I'm killed!" roared the boy, white and wiggling.

Dick grabbed up one piece of the precious board, then the other. He examined them anxiously.

The hatchet had made a clean cut, for it was keen-edged. In separating the wood it had severed the pasted-on paper as if with scissors. Only in one spot were the edges of the paper ruffled up, and there very slightly.

"How fortunate!" breathed the relieved Dick. "A minute more and where would it have been? The pieces can be joined together again. I declare, I don't wonder you look at me!"

Dick addressed these words to the boy he had made the descent on.

The latter sat where he had just sprawled, viewing in wonder his mysterious assailant, who essayed an explanation and an apology, but the lad was stupid and dazed.

Dick left him staring alternately at the sky, and the end of the yard, as if undecided whether the intruder had dropped on him from a balloon or had been shot there by a cyclone.

"Got what you came after?" queried the proprietor of the place, as Dick passed the office shanty again.

"Luckily, yes. Just in time, too. Thanks."

Dick put for the residence of Mr. Marcy, brisk, and buoyant, and satisfied.

"I'll get this in his hands. After what it's cost me of fears and perils, what a relief it will be to do so!" breathed Dick, ardently.

He felt quite jaunty and jolly as he rang at the door bell of his new friend's house.

The same servant admitted him, but greeted him with a grave bow that, somehow, to Dick's way of thinking, had an ominous suggestiveness about it.

Instead of leading Dick right up to the door of Mr. Marcy's room as he had done early in the morning, he paused halfway down the hall and waved Dick forward.

"Find the way myself? Oh, yes," chirped Dick. "Why, some one's in there. I say! Perhaps I had better not intrude," he began, turning to address his escort, but the servant had whisked around a corner and was lost to view.

"You reprehensible rascal!" came floating on Dick's ears from Mr. Marcy's room, in Mr. Marcy's full tones.

"My! some one's catching it," muttered Dick, who couldn't very well help listening.

"As to you, miss, pack up and find another place! Ah, you're here, too?" continued the rising tones. "I blame you most of all. Get out! pack! leave! I'll not have such a group of noodles in my employ."

"The room must be full of them," mused Dick. "Oh, sir, yes, sir, it's me."

Mr. Marcy, suddenly opening the door, trod all over Dick. He was bristling with excitement and seeming rage, and started in to abuse Dick when he recognized him.

"Ah, it's you?" he cried, his face clearing somewhat. "Come in. It's your turn to storm and rave now."

"What about?" began Dick, and stared blankly, for, as his host dragged him into the room, Dick amazedly observed that it had no other occupants. "Why, where's the others?" he gaped.

"What others?"

"The people you was talking to."

"Ha! ha!"

"I thought——"

"Ha! ha! Practicing, getting off steam, my boy. The servants know my ways, and are safe enough to keep out of reach. Do you wonder I'm mad? Look at that, now!"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Dick, in dismay. "Broke!"

"Shattered. Isn't it enough to try a man? The money value out of the question, think of the delay, the disappointment."

In stupefaction and distress Dick gazed at the electrical apparatus near the table.

The clamp no longer held the Crookes tube in place. Two nubbins of glass hung limp from two wires, but the full round receptacle was gone.

A thousand brittle fragments on the floor represented its shattered ruins.

"How was it?" gulped Dick.

"Maybe it was wet, maybe there was a slight crack; more likely the housemaid hit it with a duster, or they left two windows open and created a draught, but—no X-ray to-day."

"Then my board writing—"

"Did you get it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! Hand it over. This is it, is it?" questioned Mr. Marcy, interestedly examining the two pieces of wood. "Very well. I say, don't look so downcast, young Mr. President. There's more days than this, more Crookes tubes than the broken one."

"I was so hopeful," sighed Dick.

"Keep up your hope, then," cheered Mr. Marcy. "It will make the end accomplished all the brighter. I'll take good care of your precious board scrawl," and he locked the two fragments in a drawer.

"When can you try the experiment?" ventured Dick.

"When I get another tube. In a few days. I'll write you, but if you're in the city call. I'll always be glad to see you."

"You think there's no doubt—"

"Of turning the X-rays on the scrawl and getting a photograph? You can count positively on it."

Dick swallowed his transient disappointment and brightened up. He grew more satisfied than ever as his host explained how, by means of the rays, pocketbooks were photographed and their contents revealed, human hands illuminated and their skeleton underground shown, pencils brought under focus and the grain of the lead portrayed.

"Why, we soon expect to be able to go gunning through a man's skull and chase his very thoughts around!" exaggerated the old enthusiast. "I'd promise to turn the rays on that company scheme of yours, and show you all its inwardness, if I didn't see by your face that it's booming you on to fame and fortune at prize-trotter speed."

"It's proving a delight and a success, surely, sir," assented Dick, modestly.

He had to stay to lunch, and it was nearly three o'clock when he finally left the Marcy home, followed by the encouraging promise that within a week he should have a perfect photograph of old Aaron Bird's pasted writing.

"And now, what?" Dick questioned, at finding himself out of the fairyland of science and treading the humdrum, practical street again.

Dick started for the depot.

"Only two minutes before the train starts, and I couldn't reach it in less than six," he declared. "When is the next? Three hours. That will bring me to home after dark; but the day's broken, anyway. I'll look about, take in the skyscrapers and dodge the cattle cars for a bit—no, I won't. Say, the very thing! Old Daffodil!"

The idea that had come to Dick's mind seemed a most pleasant one, for he smiled eagerly and his step grew brisk again as he started forward.

At the end of the street he was passing down the bright, sparkling, broad waters of a river gleamed in the sunlight, and his

eyes were fixed there as if they had something to do with his determination.

Finally Dick came to the water's edge, passed down a beach beyond docks and piers, and made toward an antiquated dwelling set in between two ridges of sand, with a garden in front of it and a yard as promiscuous as a ship chandler's warehouse at the rear.

Dick pushed open a little gate leading into the garden of the old house.

In its middle was part of a high spar, and at its top floated the Union Jack—a very tattered specimen, however.

Farther down on the pole was a faded sign.

Once it had signified the business of the proprietor of the place, but he had evidently changed its ending from "let" to "sell," then back again, and then had nullified the whole inscription by prefixing a word, for the sign read:

"DANIEL DAFFODIL.

"No BOATS To LET."

CHAPTER VII.

"PICKLES."

Dick found the front door of the house closed. There was a little shelf beside it. On it lay a battered speaking trumpet.

"Same old Daffodil!" smiled Dick; and it was evident that he had been there before, and knew the ways of the owner of the place, for he picked up the trumpet and applied it to his lips.

"Ship ahoy!" he sang out roundly.

"Ahoy there!" came back a prompt hail from the side of the garden.

"In his grotto. I know where to find the old tar now," murmured Dick.

He went around the house, to come in sight of a snuggery set down in the middle of the vines, rocks, anchors, sea shells and sand.

It had a hammock, benches, stools and a table. Seated at the latter, smoking, a ship's compass before him, and clad in typical nautical attire, was a bent, grizzled old fellow of maybe eighty.

His face was seamed and tanned like leather, and it grew all into wrinkled smiles as he recognized his visitor.

"Young cap'n!" he said, touching his cap.

"Same to you, admiral!" greeted Dick, ceremoniously.

"Sit down. Haven't forgot the old mariner, have ye? Hungry? there's salted cod, some herring—"

"I just had lunch," interrupted Dick. "Found a trifle of time to spare, and couldn't keep away from the old dent."

"Good! Always welcome," piped Daffodil. "How's v'yages, mate?"

"You mean the company? Booming, Mr. Daffodil. How's how's—"

"The boat," supplied the old tar. "Don't be skeered, lad. A promise is a promise. Weight in gold wouldn't budge the old admiral from a pledge. Says I: 'Them boys is just where I was sixty years ago—all ardor, all bubbles, crazy for the water, and the making of men in them.' What did I say then?"

"That the boat was your sole dependence, since you couldn't get around briskly yourself, and you rented it for enough to keep you."

"That's it."

"Which brought you in about five hundred dollars a season."

"True again," nodded Daffodil, tapping off the words with his pipe.

BRAVE AND BOLD.

"Then you said: 'Pay down five hundred and take the boat for a year.' If at its end we saw a prospect of fifteen hundred ahead, the first five hundred would apply as part purchase money and the boat was ours."

"Adzackly. Well?"

"Mr. Daffodil," fluttered Dick, with hopeful eyes, "we're to hold a meeting of the stockholders of the Decatur Improvement Company to-morrow."

"Do say, now!"

"We expect our treasurer to report—what do you think?—three hundred and fifty dollars in the treasury."

"Wonderful, lad—truly splendid!"

"Debts due and the good will of the shop we are sure to negotiate for two hundred more."

"Young cap'n," said old Daffodil, arising and extending his hand, "I congratulate you. Bring the documents any time you like, and we'll close the deal. Wait a bit, mate; I want to show you an old friend."

Dick's host arose and hobbled down the garden out of view, and Dick sat back and succumbed to the peaceful, dreamy influence of the snugger.

Its ornamented interior, hung with shells, starfish and cabin utensils; its doorway guarded by a broken capstan and half an anchor; a view of the lake, dotted with graceful crafts, framed by the vine-clustered window—all suggested matters nautical and hopes nautical to the reflective Dick.

The arrangement hinted at in the conversation just engaged involved the goal for which the company had been headed for the past two months.

Dick and his friends had been well enough satisfied with building up a prosperous industrial plant in Decatur, until one day, while visiting the city to secure some tools and bicycle supplies, they took a jaunt down the beach.

A groan among the stones half filling a pier caisson attracted their attention, and investigating, they discovered lying there an old man bleeding badly from cuts in the head and wrist.

He was too faint from the loss of blood to tell who he was or where he lived, but after the boys had got him to a comfortable position and sent for a surgeon, he revived and gave the desired information.

It was old Danny Daffodil, and when they had conveyed him to his snug harbor of a home, they remained there all night, entranced.

For, insisting they had rescued him from bleeding to death where he had slipped and fallen, he not only spread out all the luxuries of his larder, but gave them a fascinating view as well of his career as a sailor for over half a century.

When they left him the next morning, the last one of them cherished a profound secret conviction that life would be an empty bubble until he could stand on the rocking deck of a full-rigged ship, a seasoned son of Neptune.

Those individual secret aspirations soon leaked out, and within a week the warcry of the juvenile corporation—"when we get five hundred dollars!"—meant the attainment of a single-hearted purpose for which every member was striving with might and main.

"I can put you on your feet as able seamen on this little swamp," declared old Daffodil, taking the lake within the sweep of his hand as if it were a mere rain pool to a man who had circumnavigated the globe twenty times; "I can put you on your feet as able seamen in two weeks. Then you ain't going to play, not you. It's work. Good! There's the tourist traffic, there's fishing 'em and picknicking 'em, and there's the carrying trade. Ah! I see the young cap'en is figuring out a solid line of progress," and

Dick was, and with some possible big results, provided his ideas were not too large for a somewhat little ship.

"How's this, mate?" sharply interrupting Dick's glowing meditations, and old Daffodil wobbled into view, holding a rope, and at the end of it a dog. "Whoop! pull me over, why don't you?"

The dog did pull him over flat. With a joyous bark it made for Dick. Then it was all around him and all over him, betraying the exuberant devotion and love of a petted animal for a true human friend.

"That will do, Pickles," expostulated Dick, at last, checking the dog's manifestations of exuberant delight. "Well, you've mended him up in great trim, Mr. Daffodil."

"Haven't I? That broken leg of his is as well as ever, and that lopped-off ear has grown quite well again. Poor fellow! he won't follow you into an elevator again, I reckon."

"I think he'd follow me anywhere," declared Dick. "Can you keep him till we come to the city again? I don't think I'll take him home with me to-night."

Pickles was just such a dog as a kind-hearted fellow like Dick Barry might be expected to adopt—rescue, rather, for he had saved him from the hands of a pelting mob in the city six months previous.

The scarred, scared animal, with one eye blinded, one side bare where hot water had nearly scalded it to death, seemed utterly unable to comprehend the kindness showered upon it when Dick got it to Decatur.

In a week, however, it began to show its love and appreciation. Its fidelity, too, for a thieving tramp lost both coat tails in trying to steal a lawn mower from the shop; and Kid Carter, pitching into his inferior in size, Tom Green, one day, was badly chewed up by the championing Pickles.

A month previous Pickles had sneaked after his master, and when Dick got off the train at Detroit, humbly followed him from under the seat.

There was nothing for it but to keep the dog with him that day. Pickles enjoyed the ramble amid old fields of tribulation and adventure; but trying to follow Dick into an elevator, slipped down the shaft and was carried a battered wreck to old Daffodil for repairs.

He was mended up now, and gamboled his delight at an expected return with his master to Decatur; but he eyed Daffodil suspiciously as the latter tied him to the leg of the table, and set up a dolorous howl as the old sailor accompanied Dick to the gate after an hour's conversation.

"I suppose the *Meteor* isn't in harbor, Mr. Daffodil?" inquired Dick, with a glance down the beach.

"No; a fishing party hired her for the day. I expect I'll hear from you soon now?"

"In a day or two, surely."

Dick bade his genial old friend good-by. He had an hour to spare before the train left, and he took his time walking along the water's edge, enjoying the prospect, his surroundings and the new life they suggested so nearly within his scope.

Perhaps over three-quarters of the leisure hour was over, and Dick had reached a residence street and had quickened his pace a trifle in a spurt for the depot, when an ejaculation of anger behind him caused him to turn.

A portly old gentleman, half off his balance, was shaking his cane back of him with decidedly vengeful demonstrations.

"Drat the curs!" he cried. "I'd have them all poisoned, or hung, or shot. Dragged his trailing rope over my feet and tripped me."

"Hello!" whistled Dick, softly.

There was Pickles. He had retreated out of the fiery gentle-

man's reach, and, slinking to the curb, he looked at his master, meek and humble as a sincere penitent.

"Go home, sir!" stamped Dick, considerably put out. "Home! how dare you?" and then poor Pickles put on a look of such comical distress that he was forced to laugh.

"Well, come ahead," ordered Dick. "You've got to be taken to Decatur some time, and I suppose you've earned the right by breaking loose from one of old Daffodil's stout sailor knots, and trailing me two miles without my ever guessing it."

The dog recognized the pardon implied in its master's changed tones instantly, and frisked and yelped joyously, and ran ahead, happy as a lark.

Dick was a little tired when Decatur was reached.

"Home again. Oh, but it don't seem possible that it's less than twenty-four hours since I last left it," murmured Dick. "Hello!"

There was Tom Green, and Frank and Elmer Winston at his side as soon as he alighted from the train.

"My! we've had a wait for you. We were getting worried," spoke Tom.

"Oh, been watching out for me, eh?"

Tom nodded gravely. Dick fancied the Winston boys looked pretty serious, too.

"Why, you're solemn as ministers, boys," he rallied them. "A little put out because I didn't get back sooner."

"We needed you pretty bad, that's a fact, Dick," said Tom.

"What for?"

"Well, we—we—" and Tom stumbled and looked appealingly at his companions. "We wanted to hold a company meeting, that's it," he blurted out.

"Oh, yes, there is one due, isn't there?" spoke Dick. "Well, it will be a grand one, fellows!" he cried, slapping his three friends in turn on the shoulders. "Boys, I've got great news!"

"Have you?" asked Tom.

"Grand. I saw old Danny Daffodil, and—why, everything's ready for us. A life on the ocean wave! A home on the rolling deep! Yes, we'll have a meeting without delay. Oh, I say, where's Van Merton?"

At this the Winston boys drew back. Tom, with an uneasy little hunch of his shoulders, moved his hand sweepingly.

"At the shop waiting for us. It'll cheer his heart. He was pinning for a change. We'll have a meeting at once, and vote to sell the business, take our cash capital, buy Daffodil's boat, and—"

"Better stop there, Dick; you're running on too fast," interrupted Frank Winston, so soberly that Dick came to a staring, startled halt.

"Stop! See here, boys, you're all acting queerly. What's up, anyway?"

"Tell him!" whispered Frank, nudging his brother.

"No, you," insisted Elmer, pushing Tom forward.

"Tell what?" voiced Dick, staring askance from one to the other of the trio.

"Well, Dick," blurted out Tom, desperately, "we won't have any treasurer's report because there's no treasurer."

"What?" gasped Dick, a thrill.

"We won't buy old Danny Daffodil's boat because there's no money to buy it with."

"What?" gasped Dick, agog.

"It's gone," faltered Tom, and his voice broke. "It has been drawn from bank. It has disappeared with the person who drew it. Brace up, Dick Barry. I'm sorry, but it's true—your friend, Van Merton, the treasurer of the Decatur Improvement Company, is—an embezzler!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"BUSTED!"

Dick Barry felt as if a house had fallen upon him and buried him in its ruins.

"The money gone!" he cried, reeling up against Tom Green, who had the good sense to grab him.

"Yes, drawn from the bank this morning."

"By Van Merton?"

"By our treasurer," assented Tom. "Dick, our pet and pride, what we've worked for and hoped for is a wreck—the Decatur Improvement Company is bankrupt!"

"Oh, never! It can't be. There's a mistake somewhere."

Dick tried to take in all that the dreadful announcement meant, as his friends led him in the direction of the little shop.

Tom was looking black as a cloud, the Winston boys were bitter and mad.

"I told you a day or two since that there was something wrong with your friend Van," reminded Frank, complainingly.

"Don't be too hard on Dick," whispered Elmer; "he's completely knocked out now."

Dick was. When they reached the shop he sat down on a stool and stared vacantly at the floor, choking up every time he tried to speak, silenced, besides, as with every additional statement of his partners things grew worse and worse for the company, and looked worse and worse for the boy he had so fondly trusted.

Van an embezzler! Van a thief! Van a renegade and fugitive—that was the hard pill to swallow, and he could not take it without flinching.

How could it be? How could he do it? how could Van, whom he had lifted from abject wretchedness and placed on his feet—a happy, independent boy, sell all his future prospects, and crush all his friends' fond hopes for the sake of a pitiful few hundred dollars?

Tom's sympathetic face quivered as he watched the dumb distress of his model and leader.

"It's just an awful thing to lose all that money, Dick," he began, "but—"

"I'm not thinking of the money, Tom," murmured Dick.

"No?"

"No. It's of him—of Van. You are sure he drew it. He's disappeared?"

"Tell all about it, Elmer," urged Frank, pushing his brother forward.

"What's there to tell but the plain fact—Van's a thief," announced Elmer, bluntly, and Dick winced but listened further.

"When Van didn't show up at all last night, I went to look for him," continued the narrator. "His solitary crying spells, his evading us all, his changed manner, his being seen with the Carter crowd and a disreputable-looking old tramp in the woods—all these things made me suspicious. As I say, I started out on a still hunt. You know how the Carters loaf around in the woods, and camp and bunk?"

Dick nodded. The Carters were natural-born gypsies. Their poor apology for a home saw them rarely in fine summer weather.

"Well, I spied around Shantytown without finding out anything. You know where they snuggle in alongside the old brick kiln chimney cool nights?"

Dick nodded again.

"As I came around there I found Van. Mind you, it was late in the morning, but there he lay, asleep—no, in a stupor. There were empty bottles, cigar stubs and scattered packs of cards on the ground. They'd had a regular jamboree, and he was in it."

BRAVE AND BOLD.

for when I roused him up Van jabbered like a drunken man. I was that horrified I hardly knew what happened when I went kiting head over heels, and got that!"

Elmer had worn his cap tipped over one eye. As he pushed it up a discolored optic came to light.

"Butch Carter did that, but it took two of them to lay me out the second time," asserted Elmer. "They drove me away. I shouted out to Van, but no reply came. He'd found his level, I calculate, and was satisfied with it."

"There's some mistake," muttered Dick, feebly.

"I came and told the boys. We didn't know what to do. We watched for you up till the noon train. Then Tom suggested fears about the money. We went to the bank. That settled it. An hour before Van had appeared, drew a check for the whole amount, and—we're out three hundred and fifty dollars."

"And the company's busted!" was Tom Green's dolorous addendum.

"There's some mistake," reiterated Dick, arising to his feet.

He had shaken off the dread, the gloom, the horror of the moment; he looked grim now.

"Boys," he spoke, "I've just one word to say. Van Merton was my friend, I vouched for him, and I'm to blame if he's deceived and cheated us; but Van Merton is not 'in' with the Carter crowd, he despises them; Van Merton has been on no 'jamboree,' he has a reason for flying from liquor and tobacco as if they were poison; Van Merton has not stolen the money. It's a mistake, there's an explanation to it all, and I'm going to prove it so."

"What's that? Listen! Hark! Strange!"

Impetuous Tom struck a mysterious attitude, and all ears were bent strainingly.

Scrape—scrape—scrape—came a sound on the low roof of the shed. Pickles, the dog, had been lying restfully in a corner, but he got up now, bristling and growling.

"An eavesdropper!" declared Frank.

"Out with you, boys!" ordered Elmer.

"It's Kid Carter—catch him!" voiced Dick, excitedly.

Just a glimpse he had of the flying figure as it vanished. Dick put after the fugitive. The others essayed to follow, gave it up, and in a minute or so Dick himself came back, breathless and chagrined.

"Was it Kid Carter?" demanded Tom.

"Yes," assented Dick; "and he outdistanced me. Boys, he was on that roof listening. What for? When that fellow hangs around here it means mischief. Well, things are too lively for me to think of resting or sitting idle."

"Look at Pickles!" sung out Tom, curiously.

Their canine friend having rested, was now engaged in inspecting his former quarters in detail.

He peeped into Dick's little cupboard, got up on Dick's bed, and then proceeding over to Van's cot, pawed it over as if in search of its usual occupant.

Then he went sniffing at Van's working jacket, and, with a quizzical, lop-sided eye, seemed counting the boys.

"He misses one of us, Dick!" exclaimed Tom, brightly. "What's the matter with taking Pickles with us? Do you remember, when the boys worked in the truck patch, how we'd give him a glove or a handkerchief belonging to some one of them when we wanted him at the shop, and Pickles would start off, deliver it, and bring back Van, or Frank, or Elmer, as the case might be?" and Tom picked up one of Van's collars, let Pickles smell of it, and cried:

"Find, Pickles! find Van!"

Pickles barked a brisk note of comprehension, caught the collar in his teeth, and stood restively waiting for a start to be made.

The lamp was put out, the door of the little shop was locked securely.

Then, Pickles in the lead, nose to the ground, Dick somber as an Indian striding after him, and the three others silently following, the little party proceeded forward on the track of the missing three hundred and fifty dollars.

CHAPTER IX.

DICK BARRY SEES A GHOST.

Dick did not allow his wits to go wool gathering. The first shock of the hour passed, he set himself at work to make the best of a bad plight.

He did not believe that his friend Van was a thief—that he had

fallen into dissipated ways and had become a boon companion of the graceless Carter crowd.

Things looked black for Van. Whatever had occurred the Carters undoubtedly had a finger in the pie, but Dick was unwilling to believe that Van had calmly, wickedly changed from a thoroughly honest boy to a heartless, ungrateful criminal.

"There's something under the surface here," he muttered, "and I shan't rest till I find out what, and do all I can toward recovering the boys' lost earnings."

Dick soon reached the aggregation of squalid huts of the brick-makers known as Shantytown. He bade the boys linger outside, and proceeded to the wretched hovel where old Mrs. Carter was known to spend three-quarters of her time drinking gin and fighting with her neighbors.

His companions had to lay violent hands on Pickles. All along the intelligent canine had demurred to the route pursued. He seemed to possess some doggish notion that they were wasting time.

Dick found Mrs. Carter lying in a drunken slumber, guarded by a crying midget of a girl.

She insisted that her brothers had not been home for two nights, and that she had no idea of where they were.

"Wisht I did know!" she sobbed. "Mammy spent all the money Kid gave her for gin, and I haven't had a bite since morning, and the boys are going away."

"Where?" Dick inquired, eagerly.

"Dunno, but far, and right off, and they're coming back loaded with money, Kid says."

Dick bore no liking for the Carters, root or branch, but he could not bear to see this innocent child suffer the pangs of hunger.

He gave her a few pennies and returned to his friends somewhat worked up over the information he had received relative to the intended migration of the Carters.

"It's a visit in turn to all their various haunts now," he told the boys.

"Yes; and the easiest way is to give Pickles a chance," insisted Tom. "He's just crazy to show his mettle. Let's try him, Dick."

"Very well. He knows Van, of course, and probably guesses we're after him, but it takes a practiced hound to track any one in yonder thick woods."

Pickles hurried them on through a mile of dense underbrush, and finally brought them in line with a glow.

He halted at the edge of a clearing. The night was intensely dark, and the camp-fire that burned there made a bright halo.

The most diminutive of the Carters, elfish little Tip, was stirring a kettle hung over the burning logs.

"He's getting supper for the crowd," whispered Tom. "They'll soon be here," but an irksome wait of twenty minutes terminated with impetuous action on the part of Dick.

Keen eared as a fox, the junior Carter turned as Dick's footsteps crunched the grass, grabbed up a stick, and stood glowering, a picture of juvenile suspicion and defiance.

"What you want?" he flared, fight to the backbone.

"I want to find your brothers and Van Merton."

"Who said he was here?" demanded the urchin, shrewdly.

"Van Merton? Ho, ho! Why, he's gone to the city."

"When?"

"Before daylight. Saw him catch the train at the switch myself," lied the unblushing little fellow.

"Then he left his coat and hat here, it seems," observed Dick, recognizing the articles lying against a tree.

"Leave them alone! Get out!" cried Tip.

With a whack of the club he nearly knocked Dick over. Grabbing up the coat and hat, he backed to the fire and swung the weapon in a whizzing circle.

"Here, Boys," called out Dick, "just quiet this little spitfire."

"Will yer?" shouted the urchin. "Try it. Ha, ha! Ha, ha!"

Quick as lightning he dropped the club and grabbed the handle of the dipper.

"Soup—free soup—hot and fresh. Come on, youse!"

"Murder!" yelled Tom, advancing and retreating.

"The young imp!" winced Dick, angrily.

Pickles turned a bound into a head-over-heels somersault with a howl of pain.

Ladling out the contents of the kettle with no sparing hand, Tip sent dippersfull of the steaming stuff all over his would-be assailants.

As his ammunition got sparse he flung the dipper at Dick's head and dove through the underbrush like a meteor.

All hands broke into pursuit, but it was run, dodge, slip with the agile Tip. The boys got separated in the erratic chase.

"He's worse than a rabbit or an eel!" puffed Dick, coming to a halt and signaling his cohorts with a whistle. "I wonder—" he began and paused.

Across the breast-high bushes a spark suddenly bore down on him—rather, a glare.

He fancied it a firefly at first. Then he knew better, for he deserter the outlines of a form.

Like the winking eye of a huge cat the round, sinister glare came nearer and shot vague thrills of dread through Dick's nerves. "A man!" he muttered. "Oh!"

He bent forward and then fell back with a shock, the boring eye not a foot from his face, and gave utterance to one ringing, blood-curdling scream.

A pair of great hands reached out to seize him, but they were instantly withdrawn as his friends dashed up to the spot, and the sinister eye vanished as if by magic.

"What is it? Dick! Dick!" cried Tom, in apprehensiive tones. "What did you holler for?"

He came upon Dick clinging to a bush, swaying there, shaking from head to foot and glaring into the darkness, white as a sheet.

"I've seen a ghost!" quavered Dick Barry, in terror-inspiring tones. "The Lightning Bug! the Lightning Bug!"

CHAPTER X.

THE HUMAN MATCH.

"Dick, I'd call in the police!"

"And cover Van Merton with disgrace? No! Besides, if we haven't been able to find him, will a blundering country constable?"

Dick spoke depressedly. It was the evening following the search that had terminated in his "seeing a ghost," in his collision with the day-blind, night-prowling Lightning Bug.

For when Dick had come out of his first void of terror after the lurid cat's eye vanished, he knew to a certainty that old Aaron Bird's former partner, the man he had believed drowned in the creek, was still in the land of the living.

Any one once observing that sinister orb boring its way through the blackness of night, blinking like some baleful star, could never forget it.

The blind man had tried to seize Dick, but the prompt appearance of his friends had scared him away.

"He's still after me, and he's hanging about in the haunts of the Carter crowd," Dick had ruminated.

What did that mean? Was this man "the disreputable" who had been seen with Van Merton? Was he now hand and glove with the Carters? Was there some great plot brewing in which all these persons, Aaron Bird's affairs, Van and the company's missing three hundred and fifty dollars were concerned?

That, there now seemed no way of finding out. After the escape of Tip Carter, after the *rencontre* with the blind man, the boys had spent many vain hours scouring the woods in search of its usual denizens.

The next day they started another quest. Not a soul among the brickmakers had seen the Carters since the day before.

All hands had disappeared, magically, effectually. It seemed as if Kid Carter had carried out his boast to his little sister—had gone "far away" in search of "loads of money," and had taken with him the sinister, one-eyed night prowler, Van Merton, and all clew to the fate of the three hundred and fifty dollars capital of the Decatur Improvement Company.

"Well, boys," Dick gave out his ultimatum that night, "we have done all we can to solve these mysteries, and we've come squarely up against a dead wall. No use talking, no use theorizing. Time will explain what bothers us now. But we cannot afford to waste that time. Here are a lot of orders for repairing come in to-day. We must start at work, we must begin all over again."

"That's the ticket!" cried Tom. "I'm not going to lay down at the first bad luck."

"No, but think how near we were to buying old Daffodil's boat," murmured Frank.

"Yes, that's the disappointment that cuts," murmured his brother.

"We may get it yet," promised Dick. "Suppose Mr. Marcy's

X-rays show that Bird has left me something substantial; I'll soon replace our lost money."

So the boys, half-hearted it is true, but with outward vim and energy, got the forge ablaze, and until nine o'clock, clink, hammer, snip, they made up for lost time.

Then Dick took up a thick coat and put a few crackers in its pocket.

"Time to go?" asked Tom.

"Yes; I'll leave you fellows to mend up those kettles and do the grinding and sharpening on the garden tools."

"Won't you be lonely watching all alone, Dick?"

"Not a bit of it. The thought of the three dollars will keep up my spirits."

Dick departed whistling cheerily, but that soon ceased, for it was only done to brace up his comrades.

He was bothered and worried, and could not get his manifold troubles out of his mind. Thinking of all these he soon reached his destination.

This was the mansion of Col. Merriam, the richest man in town.

The family were away at a pleasure resort, and that day the steward had come to the shop to hire a watchman for two nights.

A sick mother at a distance had sent for him, and as several little peculations had occurred lately at the house, he did not wish to leave it unguarded.

Dick had a key, and let himself into the mansion.

He had access only to the drawing-room. All doors except its front one were locked. The furniture was covered, and he spread out his coat on the thick, heavy carpet.

Dick dozed for an hour. Then he got up, went outside, made a tour of the garden, conservatories and stables, and returned to the house.

He kept up this system till after midnight regularly; re-entering the house after his first morning patrol, he must have accidentally left the front door open, for, just lying down, he started abruptly as first the vestibule door was slammed, and then that of the drawing-room.

"What's that—who's that?" breathed Dick, all surprise.

He heard a key turned and withdrawn. A swift, swishing tread crossed the carpet. Against the faint light coming in at the window Dick could outline a vague form, and then a scintillant marble of eerie light.

The eye!

The eye, the sinister orb that had haunted him since that night in the woods—it was bearing down upon him, it was boring its way to him.

Dick recognized the uncanny presence of his foe. He started to arise, to dodge aside, but was too late. Great brawny hands seized him and dragged him to his feet.

"Know me?" hissed a cruel voice.

"The Lightning Bug!" gasped Dick.

"Correct! No squirming or hollering now—I'm your equal in the dark."

"What—what do you want of me? Why do you pursue me thus?" faltered Dick.

"You know I was Aaron Bird's partner. He left a paper."

"Who told you?"

"Never mind. You took it to the city, you left it with a man named Marcy."

Dick was amazed at the accuracy of his captor's knowledge, but he remembered Kid Carter's eavesdropping tendencies, and was enlightened.

"I don't want to hurt you," proceeded the man, and all the while his gripping fingers hurt dreadfully, "but you're tight caught. You're to come with me to the woods. There I'll put you in the keeping of friends for a few hours."

"What friends?" choked Dick. "The Carters?"

"Oh! but you're shrewd. Never mind. You will then write me an order on Mr. Marcy for that bit of board-pasted writing he's to put under the X-rays. I get it. You go free. I'll not trouble you again."

"Never!" cried Dick, vociferously. "Give up my rights? Never! never! never!"

"You won't? Oh, yes, you will. Say!" hissed the miscreant, and that eye of his blazed and dazzled like an opal, "for the sake of your friend, Van Merton, for the sake of your three hundred and fifty dollars, you will."

"You know all about that! You scoundrel, you ruffian!" shouted Dick, in uncontrollable excitement. "I'll have you arrested—I will! I will!"

He gave a great jerk and broke loose. His captor uttered a savage roar.

Dick darted to the door. Locked. To the windows. Nailed down.

"Ha! ha! caged. I've got the key. You will race? Keep it up; but I'm a sleuth—in the dark."

The hot, hissing accents seared Dick's hearing. Round and round he ran. Then a startling thought halted him; but only for a moment.

Light the gas.

It seemed as if some inspiration prompted the suggestion. Dick touched a bracket running out from the side of the room.

After him put his enemy, seemingly enjoying the sport of the chase, as would a vicious cat or hemmed-in mouse.

Dick had turned the valve of the gas pipe with a deft twist. He could smell the escaping stuff, as, running on, he groped in his vest pocket for a match.

A keen dismay took all the courage out of him, for he groped in vain.

"It's useless!" he decided. "This monster has got me safely in his clutches. Oh, it's nonsense, the idea—but—"

The idea that shot suddenly into Dick's head made him start up afresh.

Quivering, he extended his finger and half dragged his flying feet now.

Twice he ran thus around the room, the friction of his feet causing his progress to resemble the blowing off of a steam valve.

Could he strike it? Best as he could Dick dove for the extending gas bracket, poked his rigid finger straight ahead, and—touched it.

Snap!

Flare!

A howl of rage rang huskily from the throat of his baffled pursuer.

A cry of delight surged up to Dick's lips.

The heavy carpet, the constant friction, the pure, metallic gas tip, the dry air, had all combined to render possible at a critical moment what many an ingenious boy has accomplished successfully as an amusing experiment.

Dick Barry had lighted the gas with his finger.

CHAPTER XI.

ALL ABOARD!

The minute the gas jet burst into vivid flame Dick saw that his enemy was disarmed.

The blind man went groping and staggering about, hurling horrible threats at Dick.

"Let me catch you! I'll choke you—I'll—I'll—ha! the key—the key!"

In an effort to reach the lighted jet and turn it off the miscreant dropped the key from his hand.

Dick grabbed it. Then he ran to the door. He had it unlocked and locked again in a flash.

Through the vestibule portals he dashed—out into the night he ran. He knew what was best to do now.

"I'll get the boys. Are they still at the shop? Yes—yes!" cried Dick, joyfully, as he came within sight of its flame-dancing windows. "They shall help me cage this horrible old villain. We'll take him to jail. There's no use temporizing any longer. I'll tell the whole story, and this man shall be forced to tell his, and the truth about Van's actions will come out, for after what the blind man said I am positive he has had the main hand in all that has occurred."

Dick burst in upon the boys in a whirl of wild excitement. They were just getting ready to go home. As Dick told what had occurred, Tom ran for a club, Frank for a rope, and Elmer doughtily possessed himself of a huge hammer.

Thus equipped, they lost no time in returning to the Merriam mansion.

"He's managed to put out the gas," observed Tom, as they approached.

"Yes; and here's a window all smashed out," declared Dick. "We've been quick, but he's been quicker. Boys, he's slipped us!"

All about the gardens and stables the quartet ran and investigated. Then they extended their scope of inspection to the surrounding neighborhood.

They scored a new failure. The blind man had escaped. The

boys decided to stay with Dick on guard for the remainder of the night, but clear up till morning there were no signs of the fugitive being concealed in the vicinity, no reappearance.

Dick went to the village constable immediately after breakfast. He preferred a charge of assault against the night prowler, and one of burglariously entering the Merriam mansion, giving an accurate description of the culprit.

That night Tom helped him keep watch, and the constable and two assistants hung around the woods and Shantytown, looking for a trace of the blind man. None was forthcoming.

"We got a few hints that we ran down," reported the official, "and we are pretty well satisfied that the man has left the district with the Carter boys."

"And Van with them," decided Dick, with a sigh, two nights later.

Affairs at the shop had now got back on routine basis. The boys were not so chipper as of old, but they were piling up the dollars again, and all except Dick had voted the vanished Van Merton and the stolen three hundred and fifty dollars as dead elements in the case, not worth hauling out to mourn over any longer.

Dick had accepted the situation meekly, but waited for developments. He doubted not but that the blind man had been scared away from Decatur, and had probably joined the Carters. They had Van with them, whether as a prisoner or not Dick was puzzled to guess. He theorized that through some strain of terror Van had been compelled by them to draw the company's money, and all hands were squandering it in some crazy jaunt engineered by the venturesome Kid Carter.

The morning after the trouble at the Merriam house, Dick had sent Frank Winston to Detroit. He took a note to Mr. Marcy, informing him that enemies might attempt to secure possession of the board writing, and to guard it, and to deliver it to no one except Dick personally.

Frank returned the same evening, to report that Mr. Marcy was not at home.

Old Daffodil felt about as bad about the loss of the company's money as did the boys themselves. He was afraid he could wait no longer, however. He had a chance to sell the boat to others.

Frank said the old sailor cried like a baby over his necessities and disappointment. Couldn't the boys raise three hundred dollars some way? That would enable him to pay some pressing bills, and he could wait for the rest.

"It is no use, boys," Dick had decided. "Daffodil must not lose his chances. We can't get three hundred dollars till we earn it, and he has waited on us a long time. Our ideal is the *Meteor*. The terms just suit us, but," with a heart-deep sigh, "we must take what we can get when we get the pile back to where it was before Van Merton disappeared."

That Saturday night all hands quit work at five o'clock, and tidied up preparatory to a ramble in the woods.

Tom was sitting on a stool at the door mending a hammock, when he dropped his work and threw up hands and eyes simultaneously.

"Did you ever!" he piped, vociferously.

"What?" voiced Dick, pressing forward.

"See who's coming. It is—it isn't!"

"Old Danny Daffodil?"

"Sure as you're alive!"

All hands rushed down the road—all hands staring at the approaching visitor.

Had old Danny discovered the fountain of youth? Where was his lumbago, and his stiff knee, and his slow gait, now?

His cane, usually put to full service as a support, he was waving like a pennant of victory.

He was smiling gayly, and he tripped along like a happy veteran on a holiday.

"Stand by!" he roared, halting with a salute, spry as that of a young midshipman.

"Danny—Mr. Daffodil!" cried the astonished Dick. "You didn't come way down here alone?"

"Didn't I?" chuckled the old mariner. "Jist. Avast there!" as Tom solicitously supported one arm; "I'm no seasick scullion. Good for a dozen v'yages yet. Hooray!"

Old Daffodil sat down on the bench outside of the shop, and waved his cane exultantly once more. Dick had never seen him so sprightly and good natured.

"You're in great form, admiral," suggested Dick. "Something must have happened to make you tremendously happy."

"Something!" shouted Daffodil. "Jist, mates, it was jist a question of the need of a little ready money, or you'd have been welcome to the *Meteor* without a cent."

"We know that, Mr. Daffodil," nodded Tom. "You're a true friend."

"Am I? Always. Well, luck's come—the greatest luck, the grandest luck. Mates, my old snuggery caught fire at 11 P. M. last night, and burned to the ground."

"Oh, Danny!" cried Dick, in tones of consternation; "what a loss!"

"Loss? loss?" bellowed the old fellow, chuckling and roaring with delight, "loss? It was insured for one thousand dollars! It's made me. It's put me on my feet."

"Then—"

"I'm independent at last. Mates, hard by, all! Hear the admiral's orders. It was Dick Barry who advised me to insure the old shell three months since, and Dick Barry shall share the results."

"Why, Mr. Daffodil—"

"*Meteor*, ahoy! On deck, Capt. Richard Barry—pipe the crew, Boatswain Thomas Green! Shut up your shop. A life on the ocean wave! A home on the rolling deep! Mates all, the *Meteor* is yours—I give her to you!"

CHAPTER XII.

MAKING READY.

"Satisfied, Tom?"

"Dick, I'm proud as a country boy with his first paper collar and red-topped boots."

"It's worth working for?"

"Is it? Why, if necessary, I'd sleep all day to keep from eating, and sit up all night to keep from sleeping."

"Well, as old Daffodil says, 'suckamstances' have brought things quite right, and the 'prospects' are famous."

A new Dick Barry and a new Tom Green held this spicy colloquy, a week after the arrival of old Danny Daffodil at the little repair shop, with the good news that the *Meteor* was at the disposal of the Decatur Improvement Company.

The ancient mariner's proposition was a clear one. The burning down of his house had deprived him of a quaint snuggery, but it had given him the means of providing comfortably for himself during the rest of his life.

"I shall bunk aboard ship for a week or two, young cap'n willing," he said. "Then I shall buy a life pension in the old seamen's fund. That means a snug harbor perpetual. Mates, when I saw that old rattletrap of a house going up in smoke, I crowed. It was wicked, I'll admit; but, says I: 'The elements favor the boys. They shall have the boat at last!'"

They were aboard the *Meteor* when this conversation took place, and a natty, promising craft they found it.

From water line up the boat had been reconstructed a year previous, according to old Danny's ideas. There was length enough to insure ample hold area, and a breadth of beam that made the cabin spacious.

They had made a regular contract with old Danny. The boat was to be theirs when they had paid the sum of two thousand dollars. This was to come in four semi-yearly payments at six per cent. interest.

One day Danny superintended a run across the lake with a fishing party; later they carried a load of barrels through the St. Clair River to Lexington, up the west shore of Lake Huron. When they came to figure up they found that the four days' service had brought in over seventy-five dollars.

"Why, Danny," remarked Tom, "a fellow can get rich very soon at this rate."

"Hold a bit," warned the practical old tar. "Twenty-dollar jobs are only fair weather, pleasure season accidents. Now then, we'll call the wear and tear, the interest on your investment, engine expenses and the cook's supplies, six dollars, and that's low. Then we'll average the scale of wages, say, two dollars a day, that's ten dollars."

"But we don't count our time," began Tom.

"Don't? Then you aren't business. You have an advantage over regular sailors with families dependent on them, and all that, but you're in this for profit. I'm trying to figure out that this hit-or-miss basis of say four good days' pick-up service only means about twenty dollars clear profit. That won't pay in the

long run. It's long charters, lads. A two weeks' cruise at so much cash, go fast or slow, even at a low price—the steady market rate and steady employment is the thing to strike for, and I'm talking with a man who thinks next week he'll just engage the outfit here for a run up into Lake Superior that will take a whole month."

"Splendid!" cried the delighted Tom, with sparkling eyes. "That will be something of a cruise, won't it?"

"It'll test the question if you boys know enough to run things right, for I'm only good at ordering nowadays."

"What is it, a pleasure trip?" asked Dick.

"No, business. He's a rope and matting maker, and he's come across a weedy patch way up along the North Superior shore, that produces what he calls vegetable hair. Anyway, it's a fiber that beats eamie or cocoanut husk all to pieces. He's going to strip a hold full of the stalks and bring them to his factory here. He says it's a big discovery if, as he thinks, he can make coarse cordage and street sweeping brooms of it."

Nights the boys had a glorious time in the little cabin. One end, decorated with dried spice plants, smelled of the South Sea Islands; the other, hung with walrus and bear trophies, reminded them of the polar zone. Danny had not given up cooking, and the hot cakes and tea he made over a brisk fire of cones, and the marvelous stories of marvelous lands he had visited in his checkered career, were concomitants to the most enjoyable hours the boys had ever spent.

It seemed to be a tacit understanding that Van Merton and the missing three hundred and fifty dollars should be allowed to drift naturally and quietly out of their lives. The embezzling treasurer of the company was never referred to now.

But Dick had not forgotten him. Sometimes, when he reflected that even if forced by mysterious circumstances to remain with the Carters against his will, Van might have sent some word to him of explanation, of contrition, Dick almost made up his mind that his former friend had really fallen into temptation and had gone to the dogs.

Then again he would recall the haunted, worried manner of Van just previous to vanishing, his former honest record, the blind man's boast of controlling Van and his money, the threats of the Carters—all the perplexing circumstances centering about Van's disappearance—and he fretted and theorized over all the mystery that indicated some deep plot, till head and heart both ached.

Unknown to his friends, Dick had taken ten dollars of his own money and had hired a city detective agency to put in two days on the case. All he got out of this, however, was a confirmation of the Decatur constable's report—the Carters, the blind man and Van had departed from the vicinity of the village between two suns, and friends, relatives and acquaintances had not seen hide nor hair of them since.

And, not having any five dollars a day to spare for an indefinite period of sleuth work, as the detective agency suggested, Dick relied on some friends in Decatur to keep him posted if any of the Carters returned, and in a dull, hopeless way trusted that the truth, the real truth, would come out some day.

He had been twice to Mr. Marcy's house, but on both occasions had found that gentleman absent. The second time the servant handed him a note.

In it Mr. Marcy said he was busy coming and going between Toledo, Cleveland and Detroit, but having made arrangements for a new Crookes tube, expected to perfect his experiment with the paper-pasted board before Dick called again.

One evening, three nights later, old Daffodil had just lighted his pipe, and the boys were grouped about him preparatory to listening to the second section of a rousing adventure in the Malay peninsula, when a bright-buttoned suit containing a diminutive youth came over the rail.

"Who's that?" peered Tom.

"A messenger boy," spoke Frank. "Hey! who are you looking for?"

"This the *Meteor*?"

"Yes."

"Richard Barry, is he here?" demanded the lad, producing and reading the superscription of a letter.

"That's me," said Dick, advancing.

He took and opened the letter tendered.

"What is it, Dick?" asked Tom, curiously.

"It's from Mr. Marcy."

"Oh, good! the X-rays at last?"

"I hope so."

Dick did, indeed, hope so, but his hopes fluttered, for the wording of the brief missive was ambiguous—in fact, rather startling.

"Come at once," it read. "Something has happened."

CHAPTER XIII.

IN SUSPENSE.

Somehow Dick Barry felt as if some disaster was impending as he tidied up a bit and started to respond in person to Mr. Marcy's note.

Tom's curiosity was on the jump, and he insisted on accompanying him from the boat.

"Just a part of the way, Dick," he suggested. "Say, you won't be long, will you? My! I should think you'd be anxious. What do you suppose the photograph will show?"

"Tom, I don't even know that a photograph has been taken."

"Don't? The letter says so, doesn't it?"

"No, it simply says that something has happened, and 'happen' is an ominous kind of a word sometimes."

Tom fell behind as he discerned that Dick was worried and thoughtful, and acted as if he didn't want to talk and would rather be alone, but he stood following him with his eyes a long time after the separation.

Dick walked fast. He was flustered and nervous when he reached Mr. Marcy's home.

That gentleman led him into his private room with a friendly hand shake, but Dick observed that he looked preternaturally grave.

"My boy," he began, frankly, "I hope my note has prepared you for quite bad news."

"Oh, don't say that!" breathed Dick, apprehensively.

"I've got to."

"It's about the—the pasted board writing?"

"Yes."

"It's—it's—failed? You couldn't get a photograph?" faltered Dick.

"That part of it was all right, but—I have lost the writing itself."

"Oh, never!" gulped Dick, aghast.

"Yes," sighed Mr. Marcy. "I shall never forgive my negligence, but it's gone. Now, don't look that way. It isn't altogether hopeless yet. Yesterday I got a new Crookes tube," and the speaker indicated one in place. "After experimenting with the Roentgen rays through the morning, about noon to-day, I placed your two pieces of board containing the face-down pasted document on them on yonder table. I expected to be gone to a laboratory in the next square after some chemicals I needed not more than ten minutes. There, however, I met some friends. It was four o'clock when I returned. When I did so I found the window up and the pieces of board gone!"

Dick was choking up with dread and disappointment, and could hardly speak.

"Some one had stolen them?" he voiced, almost inarticulately.

"I made a great row, you may believe. I called in the servants. Close investigation led to a revelation on the part of the coachman."

"What was it?" asked Dick, hopelessly.

"Just after I had gone he noticed a boy at the window here. Twice during the morning he had noticed him before—once astride the garden wall, and again on the roof of the next barn. He questioned the boy, who said he was looking for a lost ball."

"A boy!" murmured Dick.

"Yes, a spry, undersized urchin about twelve years old. When the coachman saw him at the window trying to get in or just getting out, he ran forward shouting. It would make your blood curdle to hear him tell of what followed. The boy saw he was caught if he tried to cross the garden. He grabbed at a trellis, worked his way to the lightning rod, and went up it like a hinged jumping jack."

"He had been watching the house—your experiments. He was on the track of what he got all the time," breathed Dick.

"When he got to the roof he sat saucily swinging his bare feet over the edge. The coachman entered and reached the window nearest him. Down the rod the urchin slid at breakneck speed. He seemed to mind heights and perils no more than a monkey."

"I know him!" cried Dick. "Did the coachman describe him?"

"Sly-faced, wore a brimless straw hat—"

"Yes, yes!"

"A hickory shirt belted with a piece of rope—"

"Tip Carter! Mr. Marcy," cried Dick; "the blind man I told you about has been on the track of the pasted writing all the time. He's hired this boy to watch you and steal it. He's got it now, and I'll never know what I hoped the X-rays would tell me!"

Dick spoke in accents of poignant distress and despair. He was sure he had announced the correct explanation of the two little pieces of board.

"Much good may it do him," remarked Mr. Marcy. "I imagine he will have some trouble finding out what it reads."

"Oh, he is a shrewd and persistent one!"

"That may be, but Crookes tubes have not come into common use yet—in fact, I do not know of a single one in working service in this city except my own. Another thing, my boy—if he should read it—that's only the beginning of his labor."

"Why, how do you know? What do you mean, Mr. Marcy?" asked Dick, surprisedly.

"The photograph I took—"

Dick sprang up beaming, and interrupted the speaker with a cry of joy.

"You had taken a photograph?" he exclaimed.

"One."

"Of the board writing?"

"Yes."

"It—it succeeded? The X-rays pierced the board?"

"The Crookes tube did its work, as I expected it would," announced Mr. Marcy, "only—"

"Oh, don't dash my hopes again!"

"Then be calm and patient. Listen. The glue must have blurred the writing by damping it. I got a picture, but it is not the clearest in the world. Even if it was, I doubt if you would be very much gratified."

"But what old Aaron Bird wrote—"

"He didn't write much."

"What, then?"

"He drew."

"Drew?"

"Yes. There is no will, no indication of hidden treasure or unhidden bank accounts, no property deeds for that. It's disappointing, I'll confess."

"All the same, I am confident it means something important. You say that Bird drew something on the pasted-down board? Tell me, Mr. Marcy," urged Dick, anxiously, "what was it?"

"A map."

"A map?" repeated Dick, in a puzzled way.

"Yes, here it is."

Mr. Marcy took from a drawer a photograph proof. Unrolling the thin sheet, he held it down by the corners across the table.

Dick's eyes took in all it contained, devouringly but disappointedly.

"A few lines," spoke Mr. Marcy; "here a dot, there a dot; here a cross, there a cross. Read those names. Gibberish! Why, except that its general plan and the bare indication of a coast line give it a semblance to a chart, I'd call it the crazy patchwork of some fantastic lunatic."

"It's not what I expected; it's a riddle, I admit," sighed Dick; "but—Mr. Marcy, gibberish to you and Greek to me though it may be, it was the literary effort of old Aaron Bird's life, and it means something."

"How can it? Why, it may be a map of his garden, it may be a map of Africa. Those dots may mean trees, they may mean cities; those crosses may signify lakes, they may signify mountains. And the names! 'Ragus,' 'Niluotinam.' My boy, don't base much on this old scrawl."

"The blind man, the Lightning Bug, based enough on it to be sure he got it."

"He was deceived like yourself as to its importance."

"I'll bet he can read it; I'll bet it's not gibberish to him!" cried Dick, in poignant excitement and anxiety. "He has a key to unlock the enigma, you had better believe, and he's got the original writing. Your photograph is blurred. Maybe the X-rays missed other fainter writing. Maybe—"

"There's some one," interrupted Mr. Marcy, as the front door bell rang, and there was some vehement discussion in the hall. "It may be an officer I employed to hunt up the boy who stole your pasted-down board writing."

A tap came at the room door. Then it opened, and, to Dick's infinite surprise, in walked Tom Green.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOUND WITH A VENGEANCE.

"It's a letter," said Tom, simply.

He poked an enveloped missive at Dick as he spoke, but he didn't look at Dick. His eyes, big as saucers, took in all the electrical paraphernalia of the room and Mr. Marcy in an awed way.

Dick read Tom's craftiness in an instant. He had found the letter at the store where all their mail came, and had eagerly seized on the excuse to get in a position where he could learn what he was dying to know—the success of the X-rays experiment.

"It's only from Decatur—it could have waited till I got back to the boat," said Dick.

"Yes, I guess it could," murmured Tom, embarrassed, and half twisting his neck off to make something mystic out of the apparatus about him.

"A friend of yours?" smiled Mr. Marcy, quick to read Tom's poorly disguised curiosity.

"Mr. Marcy, it's Tom Green; I've told you about him. One of my friends, and if you don't mind I think I'll get back with him to the rest of my friends, and tell them the result of my visit and show the map and see if a night's poring over it and talking over it won't make something out of what now looks like a riddle."

"Do just that, young Mr. President," acquiesced Mr. Marcy, "but let me see you again in the morning. My opinion is the scrawl is useless and meaningless, but I lost the two pieces of board, I've got an officer hunting them up, and incidentally he may run across that blind man of yours and learn something about his ideas and motives that may interest you."

Dick was in a fever of disappointment and uncertainty, and was glad to get outside. Tom saw that he had something weighty on his mind and followed placidly, not venturing a remark for fear that Dick would rate him for his intrusion.

"If the blind man hadn't tried so hard to get that paper I wouldn't attach so much importance to it," declared Dick. "The crowd must be in the city here; at least Tip Carter and himself. Oh! here, I forgot all about the letter you brought me, and I've crinkled it all up."

Dick halted under a lamppost and straightened out and inspected the missive in question.

"From Rob Wallace," he vouchsafed to Tom. "He promised to keep us posted about doings. What's this? Tom, where's Lundy Lane?"

"Dunno; why?"

"Listen: I saw Sis Carter last night. They heard from the boys. Kid has been staying with a relative, a drayman named Duffy, who lives in Lundy Lane."

"It's easy to find out where Lundy Lane is," declared Tom; "but what do you want to see Kid Carter for?"

"What do I want to see Kid Carter for? Well, say, just let me get my eyes and fingers on him! I want to turn him inside out and back again. I want to know what he knows about poor Van, and the stolen three hundred and fifty dollars, and a certain board writing belonging to me, and a certain blind man, and—I'm going to do it!"

"I reckon you mean that," observed Tom, his eyes catching fire from some of the determination that flashed from Dick's own.

A day previous Dick had decided that his course as captain of the *Meteor* was fully marked out for him, that he had better not meddle with destiny, but allow sleeping dogs to lie.

The thought of Van, however, the certain conviction that the board writing would mean more to the blind man than himself, set Dick's heart and soul on a new tack, upon which he started with the vim and vigor of a ferret.

When they got to Lundy Lane he found it about ten times more disreputable than the junk quarter of the city. It wasn't a lane—it was a muddy streak lined with barns and shanties.

Dick in the lead, the boys passed down the dark and wretched alley. Finally they came to a dray and halted there.

"No name on it, but it's worth finding out if one Duffy owns it," suggested Dick.

He looked around at the various hovels. Then he saw a light coming through the cracks of a shed and proceeded thither. As he did so animated voices rang out, and he applied his eye to a knothole.

Tom was performing the same operation at a wide crack two feet away.

"He's there—they're there!" exclaimed Dick, in an intense tone. "Well, I never!" muttered Tom, slapping his knee forcibly, and continuing to peer. "Kid, Dick."

"Yes, and Butch."

"And Tip—the whole ragamuffin crew—but the crowd with them!"

"It's a chicken fight. Don't you make a move till I say the word."

Dick was very much excited. Two candles stuck on rafters lit up the interior of the shed.

A strip of dirty canvas supported by round barrels described a two-foot-high ring in its center.

At one side of this was Kid Carter, holding a fighting rooster in his hands, and opposite him stooped another boy holding its ruffled and bleeding opponent.

Outside the ring was grouped the hardest lot of amateur sports ever gathered together.

The air rang with such characteristic remarks as "Aw, break away!" "Dat's no lie, eider!" "De off game chicken is sloppy!" "Naw, de playful guy's jagged up worse; see?" and as these remarks were accompanied with frequent calls upon little Tip Carter, Dick centered his attention upon that elfish juvenile.

Tip occupied a seat of honor, a feed box. He was gorging himself on caramels, passing around cigarettes, and occasionally hauling silver change out of his pockets and offering magnificent bets on his brother's game chicken.

"Youse in clover, ain't you?" demanded an envious onlooker.

"We've struck a gold mine, that's what," explained Butch. "Say, youse fellows in the ring. Time! Tip says old Rain-In-The-Face One Eye is expecting us, Kid. He got the writing, and Van and his ogles are up at the joint waiting for us."

"Ogles—joint!" muttered the innocent Tom.

"Time, time!" howled a babel of voices, and at it the two feathered contestants once more flew.

"Slip in," whispered Dick, gently, forcing back the door. "Some one's coming down the alley and will report us sneaking here."

Dick pressed boldly through the absorbed yelling crowd. Tip was his objective point of destination, why he didn't exactly know, nor how he was going to act when the instant requiring action arrived.

"Whoop!" yelled Kid, picking up his opponent's rooster and flinging it triumphantly in the air. "Both eyes gone and neck broken—I've won."

His especial pet, a vicious bulldog, caught the defunct game bird in its savage jaws as it came down. Kid stood smiling and blushing, awaiting the congratulations of his friends.

"Do I get the purse?" he smirked.

"You do, and this, too!" bawled his Brother Butch's tones, suddenly. "Look here, Kid!"

The amazed Dick was "this, too." Before he knew it Butch had caught him by the collar and had given him a shove. Over the canvas ring he went, landing flat and sprawling at the feet of the equally amazed Kid.

"What's this?" yelled the latter. "It's Dick—Dick Barry. Oh! what a Christmas! Butch, look and see if this is a solitary sneak or if he's got a mob with him."

"He's alone," reported the brother, peering out into the alley. He did not observe Tom, who had sneaked behind a box and crouched there, trembling and wondering.

Dick had struggled to his feet. The crowd pressed eagerly about the ring. Kid Carter's eye had assumed a peculiarly brave and bloodthirsty tinge. He was not afraid of Dick surrounded by friends.

"It's a picnic—an extra matinée," called out Tip. "He's going to maul him."

"I am, for a fact," announced Kid, rolling up his sleeves. "Push him back. Don't let him flunk. He's going to take his medicine this time. Butch, tie his right arm, tie my right arm, and—at it! Dick Barry, I challenge you to a duel."

Dick's face grew grim. He could not back out, he saw the futility of argument. He struggled, but a minute later, like his opponent, he was standing in the center of the ring with his right arm tied helpless to his side.

"It's a duel, and the best butter gets it," chuckled Kid.

"Stop!" shouted Dick, sharply, as the bull neck and the bullet head of his opponent were lowered to begin a series of tactics in which he well knew Kid to be a grand past master. "If it's a duel, I'm the challenged party, am I not?"

"That's regular," announced Kid, with becoming dignity.

"Then as such I demand the choice of weapons."

"Yes, yes!"

"Dat's square."

"Queensberry rules," piped eager voices.

"All right," Kid was forced to assent, but dubiously.

"Then I make the weapons—boots!" yelled Dick, in hot-headed desperation, "and, you sneaking cur, afraid of my fist, come to time!"

Like drumsticks his nimble feet struck out, like clubs they landed. He gave his adversary no time to think, and the crowd, crazy with delight over the novel encounter, held back Butch and Tip, who started to jump into the ring as Kid gave a cowardly howl and was lifted three feet in the air.

Kid's bulldog, however, escaped detaining hands. He flew over the canvas, but just as he landed on Dick's shoulders there was a new diversion.

Neither Dick nor Tom had observed that Pickles had been following them. They knew it now. With a challenging yelp Dick's faithful canine friend bounded forward on the trail of Dick's last assailant.

Dogs and boys, howls and yelps, Kid striking with his one free hand now, Dick kicking for all he was worth—such a ring scene was never witnessed before.

How it might have ended no one could guess, but suddenly, clear and sharp from the alley, came a thrilling whistle alarm.

"The perleecce!"

It seemed to Dick as if a sudden swoop lifted every occupant of the shed from the scene, as if they were paper actors on a shifting stage.

Dogs and spectators went through the side door like magic. He grabbed for Kid, who, in alarm, sped after his deserting friends, tumbled over a barrel, lost his grip on Kid, and his feet entangled in ropes and canvas, wriggled helplessly, prostrate and breathless.

At that moment Tom Green leaped to the box that had screened him from view.

"Kid—Tip, any of them! Don't let them escape. They are going to the blind man, to Van!" panted Dick.

He made a spring that landed him squarely on the broad shoulders of the flying Kid Carter.

The latter struggled, but, though twice Tom's size, he uttered a frightful roar and stumbled on, only trying to shake off his human burden.

Twisting his feet about Kid's waist, grabbing a handful of Kid's bushy hair for support, Tom Green clung for dear life.

"This one shan't get away! Run or drop as you like, Kid Carter," called out the doughty Tom, "but where you go this living night you take me with you!"

CHAPTER XV.

A LIFT IN THE WORLD.

"Murder!" shrieked Kid Carter, as Tom Green gave his hair a fearful twist.

"Get on—here, to your right!" ordered his iron-hearted rider, and he gave one ear a stinging flip. "Dick, Dick, hurry up! Let's corner this one, anyhow."

Dick, squirming half in and half out a barrel, and entangled in yards of canvas, struggled to arise to his feet.

He had a last sight of Tom astride Kid's shoulders, firm seated as a rock, while the big bully bellowed with pain at every directing movement of his nervy hand.

Then Dick was knocked flat—kicked, rather. The cry of "Police!" was no scare. The alley door suddenly burst open, letting in two brass-buttoned guardians of the law.

Neither noticed the prostrate Dick. Their eyes were fixed on the avenue of escape through which the crowd had just poured, but as one of them tore across the ring the sole of his heavy hobnailed boot struck Dick's chest, sent him flat, and his heel narrowly escaped crushing his arm to a jelly.

"Whew!" whistled Dick; "this isn't hot and heavy, or anything."

He got to his feet finally and put through the door. Yards, fences, a dozen small hovels and one immense sky scraper in the course of construction caught his eye in turn, but no trace of a human presence.

The flying crowd, Kid and Tom, even the two policemen, had disappeared. Dick heard a whack and a cry over beyond a cluster of houses and ran that way.

Then a whack and a cry rang out in the opposite direction, and he changed his course, failed to trace the apparent combination of a flying youngster and a policeman's club, and, puzzled and winded, turned a pile of lumber to bolt straight up against six boys crouching in its shadow.

"It's Dick Barry!" shot out Tip's tones, sharply.

"The one that—"

"Brought the police? You bet!"

They pounced on Dick forthwith, but they had a handful. Dick observed that Tip's companions were boys of about his own age, the younger members of the crowd that had attended the chicken fight in the shed.

If they had not got him flat unawares he might have beaten them off, even though his right arm was still roped to his waist.

As it was, he squirmed, kicked and rolled, so that his assailants had a pretty lively time putting their fingers on him when they wanted to.

Two policemen appeared a moment later, and the whole crowd took flight.

"I'm simply following section six, department rules and regulation: 'Whin in doubt, apply the hot foot.'"

Whack! Whack!

"Stop it," voiced Dick, feebly. "I can see—and feel."

He sat up now, and first stared in a kind of mute terror at the swinging cable that had let him down.

"Did I tumble from that?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't think ye was waltzing for fun," commented the officer addressed. "Have ye any bones broken?"

"I think not."

"Can ye stand up?"

Dick tried it, but limped and winced perceptibly.

"Be a thankful gossoon that ye're no worse," spoke the other policeman, gravely. "Ye came down like a capuchin."

"A catapult, ye mane, Mulvihill."

"Well, it might have been a catacomb, if we hadn't just tipped the tar kettle to smother the flames from reaching the lumber. And now, me festive friends, how came ye up there?"

Dick told them his story. By the time he was through the two fat guardians of the peace were solemnly shaking their heads at this last audacious adventure of the Lundy Lane gang.

As to the whereabouts of its members at present they were in positive doubt. They went around with Dick to the various hovels in the vicinity, but met close-mouthed informants, and got not a trace of the crowd.

Dick requested the officers to particularly look out for Tom Green. Then he started on a limp for the boat. His fall seemed to have shaken up every bone in his body, and he felt that, unassisted and alone, he was in no condition to proceed further against the Carter contingent.

"I declare! this last racket has pretty well used me up," soliloquized Dick, as in his jaunt down the waterside he had to rest several times to overcome faint feelings and dull, racking pains in his chest and head.

He at last got to the boat. Old Daffodil and the two Winstons were on deck looking out for him.

"How now, mate?" cried sharp-eyed Danny, as Dick came over the rail with unaccustomed clumsiness.

"I've had another sprint with the Carters, that's all," explained Dick, sinking to a hammock.

"Can't let them be, can't ye?" remonstrated the old sailor.

Dick asked for a drink of water and rested a few minutes. Then the excitement of narrating his latest adventures brought some of the color back to his face.

Relative to the Carters and the blind man, and Van Merton, old Daffodil had but one sentiment to express all along.

They were a bad crowd, and ought to be dropped like red-hot copper cents.

When, however, Dick related the details of his interview with Mr. Marcy, the old mariner betrayed the liveliest interest, excitement and satisfaction.

"A map?" he exclaimed, smacking his lips as over a dainty morsel of nautical fare. "Mate, that sounds like something tangible."

"Tangible?" repeated Dick, incredulously; "I think it is far from that."

"Ah! it's got the 'Robinson Crusoe' twang to it, lad, the 'Treasure Island' flavor. Why, it's branded A1—genuine, because it's a riddle. Think these queer scrawls and all such come only in books? Nonsense! The very fact they're as they are is because

uneducated old tars want to tell something, don't know how to do it, and, being naturally suspicious, made a riddle of it. A map, mate? I'm death on maps!"

"You shall see it, Mr. Daffodil," said Dick, "only I'm afraid you can't make much out of this one."

"Hum! you just try me. Now, then, look there!"

Dick looked and then arose to his feet summarily. A form was approaching.

"It's Tom!" cried Dick, in glad tones.

Tom came up with a swagger. One corner of his cap was pulled down over an eye, and a red, swollen knob showed on the end of his nose like a fresh rosebud. His attire, too, bore various marks of disorder.

"Is Dick——" he began, and then saw Dick, and came forward with a stately strut and extended his hand.

"Put it there, partner," he spoke.

"Why, Tom! you look——"

"Chewed up? Dog and boy. Is Pickles here?"

"No."

"Then he's on the way, probably taking the journey home in painful stages, as I had to do."

"Lift up your hat, Tom. Why, you've got a dreadful black eye!"

"Kid Carter can discount it—he's got two."

"And your nose! What struck it? A cannon ball?"

"You'd ought to see Kid's. His is smashed flat."

"You had a row?"

"I stuck tighter to him than a brother," asserted Tom. "I pinched his ear and drove him here; I slammed his jaw and hurried him there, and all the time I worried him and badgered him to find out something about Van."

"Oh! Did you?" began Dick, eagerly.

"And learned—nothing. He claims that Van is one of them, body and soul, that the blind man only needs the board writing, the merest pointer, to head him for the hiding place of old Aaron Bird's treasures, and the mob is to go with him. Then we got quarreling. Kid struck up, I struck down. The dogs took a hand, and amid it all down on us pounced a policeman. He hammered me, but I wouldn't let go. I'd jump, and whack—Kid's shoulders would catch it. Finally I got one on the nose. It knocked me off and laid me out. When I got up Kid had moseyed. Here I am. What's your report?"

"Come, come, mates," here piped in old Daffodil, who had listened with undisguised impatience to the colloquy. "What's buffets and sich jiggabs to business? The map, Dick. I can't rest till I've had a look at it."

All hands adjourned to the cabin. A lamp was lighted, and, an eager group, they drew around the spacious table there.

Old Daffodil acted like a retired trapper whetting his appetite for bear meat. He gloated over the scrap of paper, the photograph proof that Dick produced.

"Assuming, mates," he began, unfolding it with eager, trembling hands, "assuming, as Cap'n Dick states and believes, that this here little document really represents the last indication of one Aaron Bird as to the hiding place of treasure, of supplies, of portable property of any description, I start on the hypophosphites——"

"Hypothesis, admiral," corrected Tom, politely.

"English pronunciation—quite right," nodded the old sailor. "On the hy-po, so to speak, that this here writing is a tracing, a plan, a map. As a man who is death on maps, I shall take an expert look at it."

Old Daffodil put a magnifying glass in his eye and scanned the photograph proof.

Upside down, across, slantingly, criss-cross he squinted at it. Then his finger traced the wavy line surrounding it.

"Coast lines," he nodded, gravely. "It's a map."

Ten minutes more of close inspection followed. Then he raised his head and made a further announcement.

"Map," he vouchsafed, "of one of the great lakes."

"Oh!" muttered Dick, dubiously, "which one?"

"Map," pronounced the sage old expert once more, "of Lake Huron."

"How do you know?"

"Dots islands, crosses special points on the same. Ha, ha! ho, ho! Cheap, cheap! Why, the childish ruse to obscure real names. Jog your jography memory," chuckled the old fellow. "Now, then, northern Lake Huron. Catch me. Niluotinam."

"Yes, what of it?" demanded Tom.

"Spelled backward."

"Oh, Manitoulin."

"Good! Ragus?"

"Sugar."

"And so on; right names, eight island. Plain as the nose on your face!"

"Why, then," cried Dick, his eyes brightening, "you think——"

"I think? I know," declared the confident old mariner, "that this is a map of the group of islands—Sugar, Manitoulin, St. Joseph's, exssettery—lying up along Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. And there, mark ye, if there's anything been hidden to find, you'll find, according to this here X-rays document, what old Aaron Bird has hidden!"

CHAPTER XVI.

AFLOAT.

"All ready?"

"Everything."

Dick's query was bright as the call of a lark, and Tom's reply was spick and span as a glad hail from a home port.

After trouble, plot, mischief, adventure, there had come a lull, and what Fate had apparently been driving the four members of the Decatur Improvement Company forward to for over a month, was now presented to each and every one so clearly, that from Dick to Frank, and Tom to Elmer, certain conviction ran current that their mission in life was sailing for a living.

Here they were, a week after the tar kettle exploit, fairly on the threshold of their first nautical undertaking, and given a good boat, a wise and experienced counselor, a primal object in view sharply outlined—the search for old Aaron Bird's hiding places—what was the matter with succeeding, just as a matter of course?

They had seen to every detail of equipment the night before. They were manned, registered and provisioned. Old Daffodil was going with them, "as a passenger strictly, mind ye!" and every last one of them knew that he would breathe a vast sigh of relief when he felt the waves rocking under the stanch little boat, and land left behind for good at last.

Neither Mr. Marcy's officers nor the Lundy Lane police had heard or seen further of the Carters and their companions, and Pickles had disappeared. Dick had his theory. The Carters had killed the dog. As to the blind man, he suspected where Bird had hidden what he had hidden, and would take the crowd with him to assist him in his search, to form a guard offensive and defensive when daylight robbed him of his powers of sight.

"That dreaded Lightning Bug!" Dick put it with a shiver. "I wonder if he is to cross our track up North as he did at Decatur?"

Old Daffodil had not slept on the boat the night preceding. An old crony had induced him to stay at his house ashore, but the boys were to come there for him at eight o'clock.

So, leaving Tom and Frank aboard, Dick and Elmer proceeded ashore to act as a guard of honor for the old sailor back to the *Meteor*.

"After the admiral?" piped his friend, whom they found in his little notion store. "Why, mates, I estimate old Danny's on his way aboard ship."

"No, we didn't pass him."

"I went upstairs an hour ago. Danny's clothes warn't visible, so says I, 'He's slipped off airy'—anxious to try his sea legs once more."

"I'll run upstairs if you've no objection," suggested Dick. "He isn't aboard, we didn't pass him on the way, and he may have slipped out this morning and slipped back again."

"Tain't impossible. Go ahead, mates."

"He's not here, you see?" said Elmer, as they came to the head of the stairs.

"No, he's left. His clothes are nowhere about, and the bed's closed up."

It was a folding-bed and it stood upright now, but, as Dick was turning to leave the room, from it proceeded a strange, subdued sound.

"Rats in there. Likely scared old Danny," he commented, and then, his eyes dilating with amazement, he sprang toward it with the one expressive word:

"Gracious!"

"What is it, Dick?"

"Look! For mercy's sake get on the other side. Why, old Danny is shut up in the bed!"

BRAVE AND BOLD.

"W-what!"

Four bronzed finger tips were visible, moving where the extended section barely met the upright one. They wiggled. A groaning hiss accompanied the movement.

With vigorous promptitude the boys pulled down the bed.

"Flattened out! Mates, it's me."

Danny lay flat, crushed. His new hat was slab-sided, his new coat bunched up in wrinkles, and his face red as a beet.

"I was dressed," he explained, when he caught his breath, "and I stepped on the bed to reach my glasses laid on the top up there. Bang! she took me. Push? Get in and try it. Holler? I had a pipestem breathing hole, and I didn't risk closing it up by rash experiments. Could I have held out? Dunno, but a bunk for me after this. You'll never get old Danny in one of them new-fangled affairs again."

"We've all had our tussle with accidents," said Tom, when they arrived at the boat and he got through laughing over the old sailor's odd predicament. "Hope we leave all bad luck behind when we set sail, admiral!"

Old Danny didn't say much, but went below. Just as the last preparations were being made to start from shore, he came on deck, holding something round and ponderous before him.

"Why, what have you got there?" inquired Dick, from the engine pit.

"Chopping bowl."

"Yes; but what's in it?"

"Charm."

"It looks like mush!" declared Tom.

"It's a mixture, that's a fact, and it's heathenish, but never knew it to fail."

"Yes; but what is it for?"

"Ye see the heap of white stuff? That's made from scales of the speerit fish caught in Chinese waters. Then there's a pinch of phantom loon feathers, a dried corner of the left fin of a dolphin, a little powder, a fuse, and there ye be."

"Oh, a sort of offering to the gods to bestow a safe voyage?"

"That's the way the Chinese do it. Sailed them waters years, and rather like the old hocus, so, when we gets fairly started I sets the chopping bowl afloat."

"Yes, Danny."

"And all hands sing out: 'Take a whiff, Father Neptune! Send a breeze, Father Neptune! Bring us luck, Father Neptune! Ta-ra-ra!'"

"Boom de ay!" piped Tom, with a grin.

"No, not 'boom de ay!'" objected Daffodil, crossly. "If you can't do better than poke fun at this here solemn ceremony, and respect an old tar's notions, just don't talk at all, mate."

"All right, Danny. I didn't mean anything," apologized Tom. "I'll sing the ta-ra-ra to the king's taste."

All was ready at last. A rod connected with a bell near the wheel, propeller-like, and old Danny touched it.

Dick had got so he had acquired superb control of the working mechanism of the boat, and the *Meteor* shot out from shore like a fairy.

Old Daffodil got near the stern, lit the slow fuse stuck in the mass of stuff in the chopping bowl, and lowered it.

"She's afloat. Slow up, cap'n, now, while we sing—

"Take a whiff, Father Neptune! Send a breeze, Father Neptune! Bring us luck, Father Neptune—"

"Ta-ra-ra!" roared Tom, in ear-splitting chorus. "Hooray! fireworks! Fourth of July!"

The rocking chopping bowl fell astern, spitting up smoke and sparks, old Daffodil, solemn as an owl, watching it.

"It's a big dignity for sich small rain pools as these ponds," he remarked. "If I was alone I'd never waste the stuff this side of the Indian Ocean, and then only in the cyclone season, but with four sich rantankerous tars as ye four better shrive the ship at the start. Now, Dick, you can run to your heart's content."

"Hold on—not yet. Dick! There's, there's—"

"The Carters!" yelled Frank.

"What?" bolted out Dick.

All hands were gazing ashore. It took only a glance to verify the excited statement.

Running down the shore from the spot where the *Meteor* had been so long moored, were two ragged fellows, and in an instant the boys on board recognized them.

Kid Carter was in the lead, and his brother Tip had a hard time keeping up with him, for Kid's feet fairly flew along the sandy reach.

"They're after—" began Elmer.

"A dog. See, they're chasing one!"

As Frank spoke, Kid raised his hand and let fly a stone.

It struck the bolting, scudding animal slightly in his lead. The creature uttered a howl, limped, snapped, and then streaked it ahead like a flash again.

Dick brought progress to a sudden halt with a shock.

"Boys," he cried, "they're chasing our dog!"

"Yes," shouted Tom, springing forward, excitedly, as if he would bob headlong over the rail, "it's Pickles!"

At that moment the dog halted, stared panting at the boat two hundred feet distant and ran into the water.

After him plunged Kid; in his wake came the never-to-be-dared Tip Carter.

"Fling a rock—brain him!" roared the former.

"Catch him yourself; he's nigh done out!" panted Tip.

"About ship!" suddenly ordered old Daffodil. "Don't you see them boys are after the dog for something he's got?"

"What?" demanded Dick, sharply.

"Pickles has got something tied around his neck!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT PICKLES BROUGHT.

"Pickles!" shouted Dick, excitedly.

The dog heard him, saw him even across the two hundred feet of water intervening.

It uttered a plaintive yelp. All hands discerned that the nervy little animal was pluckily making for its friends, but very nearly exhausted.

At Decatur, as the boys well knew, the Carters spent one-half their time in the creek.

They showed their superb swimming accomplishments now. Kid floated like a feather, the diminutive Tip cut the water and dove like a fish.

Pickles had outdistanced them ashore, and, judging from his bedraggled and wearied appearance, for a long distance, but he was no match for them afloat.

Every stroke of big Kid's long arms bore him six feet forward, and every curve and dash of the spry Tip seemed to send him ahead on a jump.

Pickles, with his little forefeet paddling for dear life, resembled some frantic pigmy getting out of the path of destructive giants.

"There's something around his neck, I tell you," repeated old Daffodil, fairly dancing from foot to foot with excitement.

"Yes, something white," assented Elmer.

"A handkerchief," guessed Frank.

"And they're after it!" shouted Tom.

Dick ran to the engine to turn the boat, which had become stationary. Tom's eye rested on the skiff. He started toward it. Then he saw that it was padlocked to a hook. The oars had not yet been brought up from below—it would require several minutes' time to get it into service.

"Hey, stop that!" yelled old Daffodil, shaking his fist at the dog's pursuers.

Tip had sped past Pickles. In doing so he made a grab. His hand struck the animal, but slipped him.

Kid Carter gauged his speed closer. The intently-watching boys on deck saw him shoot out a hand. His fingers encircled the white material tied around Pickles' neck.

As if the intelligent canine bore there something of importance, something for his friends of the *Meteor*, and knew it, the instant of the contact, with a savage snap the dog buried its teeth in Kid's gripping hand.

The latter uttered a yell of pain and rage. He relaxed his grasp, but only to double his sinewy fist.

With the force of a young sledge hammer he brought it down on the dog's skull.

Under the surface Pickles sank like a dead weight. Both his enemies trod water, eyes fixed on the spot where they expected Pickles to come up.

At this moment the boat swung sharply around; at this moment, too, there was a splash.

"Hold on, hold on!" quavered old Daffodil, running to the rail, but he was too late.

Tom Green had stood all he could without some expression of his sympathy for poor, beleaguered Pickles, some move of animosity against his persecutors.

Stripping off his coat, kicking off his shoes, he dove overboard. Then with prodigious hand-over-hand strokes he made for the center of conflict.

"Watch out!" snapped Tip's shrill voice.

"Ho, ho!" railed Kid, "does he want a ducking, too? Has the dog sunk?"

"No, he's there; look!" cried Tip.

Pickles had swum or floated under water fully ten feet, and had come up at an unexpected spot.

It brought him three yards nearer to the approaching Tom. Kid's blow and exhaustion, however, seemed to have used up the animal. Before any of them could reach him Pickles, after a few feeble efforts at paddling, sank again from view.

Both the Carters came forward on a swift rush, reckless of the fact that this act brought them nearer the boat, and that the boat now was momentarily nearing them.

Tom had steadied himself, and treading water was looking in a circle for the dog to come up again.

Into him, with sheer force and evidently on purpose, Kid came driving like a water ram bearing down on a sloop at anchor.

He struck Tom head down, his favorite butting tactics, and Tom keeled over.

As he came up, mad and excited, he slapped out a hand, took Kid over the jaw, and the water bubbled and spattered like a cascade.

He managed to hook his fingers in Kid's coat collar and had him at a decided advantage, fronted away from him and squirming, when down he went as if a shark had pulled him down.

The agile Tip, with a dive, had seized Tom's feet and accomplished this rescuing maneuver.

"Look out!" he yelled, coming afloat again. "Kid, the dog's sunk, we're beat. Put for shore."

"I won't. I'll—"

But Kid did. The prow of the *Meteor* threatened a crushing collision. The brothers swung to its larboard, and the swell swept Tom on the other tack. Thence, dripping and puffing, he reached the side of the boat and pulled himself up on deck.

"You cowards, I'll see you again!" he spluttered after the two Carters.

"Yah!" sung back Tip, derisively, turning a skillful somersault in the water.

Expert Kid only raised one foot and wagged up churning flecks of foam in silent contempt.

"We sank the purp!" yelled Tip, reaching the beach. "That's what we was after."

Dick slowed up the boat.

"It's too bad," he murmured, "to lose Pickles."

"And whatever he had about his neck meant something," spoke Frank, reflectively.

"I'd like to cage one of those young scoundrels, and keep him aboard till I'd pumped him dry," muttered Dick.

"They'd make sure to slip free on all occasions," remarked Elmer. "I say—Dick! Dick!" he continued, excitedly, starting up and looking past the bow. "What's that?"

"The admiral's chopping bowl."

"Yes, but what's rocking it?"

"About ship!" roared old Daffodil, peering. "It's the dog. Buoy, ahoy! Shipmeet, aspar! hold firm. Mates, luck's on our side after all, and the Chinese hocus did it!"

Pickles seemed to have come to the surface and gained a sustaining raft while all eyes were centered on the retreating Carters.

Never was rescued shipmate pulled aboard more gladly than was poor Pickles, when the boat grazed him and Tom's hand grasped both chopping bowl and clinging castaway.

Pickles stood for a second half dazed and dripping. He essayed a feeble tail wag, then he stretched out exhausted.

Only with his eyes, almost human in their expression of his appreciation, affection and delight, did Pickles have the power to respond to petting and caresses.

"He must have had a terrible run of it wherever he came from," said Tom.

"The Carters must have had him a prisoner and he just escaped," calculated Dick.

"Mates, I think he was sent!" put in Daffodil.

"Sent?"

"Yes."

"Who by?"

"That's to find out. Think those young pirates that followed

him would waste wind on such a chase for fun? Let's have a look. Yes, this is a handkerchief."

Daffodil got his fingers at work on the article encircling Pickles' neck.

"Knots," he reported. "More knots," he went on. "Tied for keeps. Here we are," and he got the handkerchief free and arose to his feet.

"Nothing but a handkerchief, you see," began Tom, but Daffodil interrupted him.

"Oh, yes, another knot. In the middle this time. Open she comes, and—"

Something dropped out quite soggy, very compact. It struck the deck like a piece of putty.

Dick picked it up.

"It's a folded piece of paper with a stone to hold it in shape and weight it," he said.

"Careful, mate," warned Daffodil. "Don't muss or tear. That dog was sent, says I. So says I now, that there's a message. See if it ain't."

Dick carefully spread out the soaked paper, layer after layer.

A mere scrap of blurred pencil lines, it lay flat for inspection on a smooth deck plank at last.

"An innocent," read Tom. "Why, Dick! It's from Van Merton!"

"Yes," choked up Dick, trembling despite himself. "It's his own handwriting, it's word at last. He had but one chance to send us a message—Pickles. It's come. Can you make it out, Tom? Read it. I'm—I'm flurried!"

Tom pored over the fragment. Slowly he picked out the words it contained. Then amid a deathlike stillness he read:

"An innocent, misjudged boy, the victim of circumstances that shuts his lips and breaks his heart, sends word to his friends to beware of the enemies they know. Don't go north. If they must, beware of the Lightning Bug!"

Dick Barry's face lit up, but he did not speak a word.

To him that strange message told a sentient fact—Van Merton was not a criminal, but the victim of a plot, and some day—oh, he secretly vowed it! that plot should be laid bare.

"Beware of the Lightning Bug," muttered old Daffodil. "Humph! Here's the old mystery come back with a vengeance."

"Yes, and muddier than ever!" was Tom Green's terse addendum.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"POINTERS."

To a boy who boards a stanch, comfortable steamer and crosses from Chicago to Michigan City in four hours, or takes a pleasure trip around Lake Erie, smooth progress on a glassy surface conveys the idea that the great lakes are very small rain pools indeed when compared with the ocean.

Put the same boy aboard the average yacht, however, let him start from the southern end of Lake Huron, keep out of sight of land in all kinds of weather, and, cruising north among fifty odd islands that dot the Canadian shore, find himself lost in the wide expanse that Georgian Bay affords, and he obtains quite a different idea of the prospect.

At least so reasoned the crew of the *Meteor* three days out from Detroit, and they had good and cogent basis for their convictions in the shape of lively and unique experience.

The warning note from Van Merton, while it did not turn the ardent voyagers a hair's breadth from their fixed purpose, convinced one and all just the same that in going in search of old Aaron Bird's supposed "cache," they were likely to run afoul the same snags that had hindered straight progress in all their movements for some weeks past.

Old Daffodil put affairs as he understood them very tersely into a nutshell of statement, and gave it no further thought.

"We're on the track of the map's indycations as to possible portable property, flotsam or jetsam hid away," he observed. "Mr. Bug is likewise on the trail with his precious mob. Argymint is, who gets there first, who finds sharpest. If 'twant for the fascinating influences on me of these here secret maps generally, I'd say drop it all. But when I think of Capt. Kidd and Buccaneer Bill and the pirate finds of the Spanish main, I say, try the v'yage. If it pans out null, void—"

"Nit and *nil desperandum*," put in Tom.

"Zackly; then, says I, flop back to legitimate, and chalk it down to experience."

"He's just as much of a boy as any of us," Tom told Dick, whisperingly; "just as razzle-dazzled about this supposed hidden treasure as a kid over his first Robinson Crusoe story book."

However, Master Tom found old Daffodil a stern taskmaster when system and discipline required it. Talking romance was all well enough during leisure spells, but when it came to ship duty he ruled the crew with an iron rod.

The result was that when the boys struck a terrific storm the second night out, as an outcome from Daffodil's superb training, every member of the crew did his apportioned part like a skilled mariner, and old Danny enthusiastically commended their nerve and diligence.

"I'm proud of the last mother's son of you," he told them at breakfast. "You see what knowing the meaning of squaring the head sails helped you to do toward keeping us from going down seven hundred and two feet, Master Tom!"

The *Meteor* put into Thunder Bay and made a night stop at Alpena. Here Daffodil went to visit an old nautical friend, took the map with him, and came back to the boat with a generally satisfied expression on his face.

"There's wisdom in counsel," he told his juvenile friends. "Now, what my old shipmate, Ben Bubbles, didn't tell me about the islands up north isn't worth knowing, I estimate."

"Did you show him the map, Mr. Daffodil?" inquired Dick.

"I did."

"What does he make of it?"

"A puzzler, and no discount. Says he: 'Here's Manitoulin, and Sugar, and St. Joseph's, and Drummond, and Bois Blanc, Delphi and two other islands. All have dots and crosses.' Says he: 'Was this man a ancient mariner, a regular wholesale ship scutter, that he has eight odd pints where he hides his plunder?' Then he reasons and smokes a while, and I tells him Bird were no sailor. 'Land lubber, eh?' says Bubbles, with a snort. 'Ah! that changes the sitywation. Mate,' he says finally, 'you'll find a game of hide and seek on your hands. In my opinion you'll find no Spanish doubloons or sich. This ain't no treasure lead.'"

"No?" murmured Dick, interrogatively.

"No. 'What, then?' asks I. 'That,' says Bubbles, solemnly, 'that is for you to find out, which when the same shall be as ever was, notwithstanding, and therefore why not?' Oh, the wisdom of that there Bubbles!"

Out of all this gibberish, however, the joint decision of the two old cronies influenced settled action.

Manitoulin Island was the largest on the chart. They would visit it first. It furthermore had a certain outline of form on the photograph scrawl, the tracery of certain indentations, which Daffodil asserted made it pretty certain that if they came to anchor in an obscure and isolated point known as Dredge Bay, they would about strike the place where a cross indicated some landmark.

It was a beautiful afternoon when the *Meteor* drove its way past a directing buoy, and, following a zig-zag shore formation for a few miles, came to a stop alongside a low rocky causeway, that could not have been better adapted for dock purposes if it had been built of solid masonry.

The green, fir-clad shores, fair and sloping, had a tempting influence on the boys, despite their nautical proclivities, and after all had been made stanch and trim, and Dick suggested a camp amid a natural bower in sight of the *Meteor*, all hands willingly acquiesced to the proposition.

Partaking of a generous lunch under green spreading boughs, a natural discussion of their new situation ensued.

"This is the Grand Manitoulin," said Daffodil, with an expansive wave of his hand; "say one hundred miles long, as wide as thirty miles."

"It's going to be a hustle looking for Bird's cache, then," remarked Tom.

"Ay, if 'tweren't for the dot. That says Dredge Bay; and here we are. Now, then, marks for others or strictly private, Bird meant this a starting point. Trust me, lads, according to Kidd, according to Buccaneer Bill, here or nigh here you will find prospects."

"Such as—"

"Star chipped on a rock; dagger cut in turf and p'intin'; blazed trees, and such like, exsettery. To help his own memory, Bird would do that."

"Let's look," suggested Tom, all ardor.

"That's what we came for," insinuated Daffodil.

The boys started inshore by four diverging courses. Daffodil walked along the immediate beach like a general inspecting the fortifications of an enemy.

He tapped old tree trunks with his cane; he tossed over flat, suspicious-looking stones with his foot; he pawed the turf in search of signs of recent or remote footpath uses.

Finally he paused where four or five large pieces of slate rock were piled up. Then he whistled to Dick, who, pursuing his own devices, was nearest to him.

"Young cap'n," he stated, "that there pile of stone is somewhat meaty-looking."

"You mean as being a mark, a starting place?"

"Jist. Human hands put them so."

"I'll strike straight in through the thicket from it, say you!"

"It's a try, mate."

Dick disappeared, and Daffodil sat down on a dead tree, put on his spectacles, and began studying the photograph map.

The Winston boys came stringing back in about ten minutes, and announced that they had been able to find "no signs."

A little later Tom appeared, glum and grim as a pirate, savage, too.

"Say!" he demanded, sarcastically, "how long do you imagine a fellow would be seeking the right rock of ten thousand possible rocks, and the right tree of ten thousand possible trees before he finds it?"

"Yes, but when he does strike the right one," affirmed the old sage, impressively, "he's got there—he's reached the starting point."

"Humph!"

"And—Dick Barry has struck just that!" exclaimed the old sailor, arising to his feet with a glow of conviction as a ringing hail came from the thicket into which Dick had disappeared half an hour previously.

At its edge a minute later Dick himself came into view.

"Boys! admiral!" he shouted, excitedly, "this way."

Even Daffodil hurried forward. There was a certain infection in Dick's promising gestures.

"What have you found, Dick?" questioned Tom.

"We're right!" crowed Dick. "Oh, such luck! There's no mistake. The map's no nonsense."

"Yes, but what—"

"Come here."

Dick ran into the woods perhaps two hundred feet. All hands ran after him. Old Daffodil hobbled, and limped, and panted, but he trailed along with the others.

"Look!" cried Dick, with sparkling eyes.

Across a tree nailed some five feet up the trunk was a piece of tin about four inches long, cut in the shape of an arrow.

Its point turned north. Dick ran about a hundred feet further on.

"Look!" he cried again, pointing to a second tree and a second arrow.

"Look!" he repeated exultantly, proceeding to a third tree and indicating a third arrow.

"S-stop! Ahoy! I say," puffed Daffodil, but stumbling on. "Do you want to founder an old tar? We see. Good for you! them's signs. Now, then, them's arrers."

"As you see."

"Who put them there?"

"Who!" ejaculated Dick. "Luckily I know, luckily its substantiates the whole map theory."

"Good!"

"My old employer, the man who made the X-rays map, put them there," asserted Dick, with definiteness.

"How do you know that, young cap'n?"

"Because," said Dick, "I remember distinctly, just before he went away on one of his mysterious jaunts, he made a die and cut out a lot of those arrows from pieces of tin."

Old Daffodil tipped his hat with a broad smile of satisfaction.

"Young cap'n," he cried, "take a clear bill of lading as first discoverer. You've struck gold. Them arrers is signs of the purest ray serene. We're on the right track. Yes, shipmates, the bow of promise bends above us, and them arrers is clear finger posts p'inting the way to old Aaron Bird's hidden fortune."

CHAPTER XIX.

UP!

The five hopeful and excited explorers examined the last tin arrow Dick had pointed out with infinite interest.

"Isn't it great?" piped the exuberant Tom.

"We're on the right track, that's certain," declared Elmer.

"I have frequently wondered what Bird made those arrows for," spoke Dick. "Sometimes Bird would carry with him on his journey a long rope. Next time a big auger or a spade. The tin arrows always puzzled me."

"It's simple enough now," remarked Daffodil. "He used them to pint the way to his cache."

"One of his caches, you mean, Mr. Daffodil," corrected Tom.

"Zackly."

"I've been thinking—" began Dick.

"You've a right to, lad, seeing you've been doing as well. Out with it."

"These arrows lead to something."

"Surely."

"Still, isn't it a bit queer that Bird would so publicly and palpably blaze the way thus to a hiding place?"

"Yes, it's like hiding a lot of gold and putting up sign boards to inform the public to come and get it," observed Tom. "This hidden treasure—"

"Hold hard," interrupted Daffodil, promptly. "Bubbles says there ain't no treasure."

"What is it, then?"

"Well—prospects."

"What kind of prospects?"

"That's the poser. Suppose we push on and find out?"

"Good! hurrah for the next tin arrow! See who finds it first!" shouted Tom, and in his usual heedless way, made sure to dive in the exact contrary direction to that in which the latest-discovered arrow pointed.

The others puttered around according to their own notions of where the next arrow should be. Dick alone followed out a system.

"Face from the last arrow and follow your nose," was his simple theory, and he seemed to be in luck that day, for in less than five minutes he came upon number four of the mysterious pointers.

He looked around to hail his associates, but they were not in sight, and then a certain pride in taking the sole lead, a bubbling curiosity and a determination to attain a definite result, led him to pursue a solitary advance.

Deeper and deeper into the forest plunged Dick. In the course of two hours' time he located seven more arrows.

Some would be bent so as to show a divergence in the trail. At such points Dick would experience some little trouble in finding the next tree.

At last Dick came to a tree where two arrows showed, then he came to a tree where three arrows pointed right through a ten-foot high growth of heavy brush.

"Getting warm!" soliloquized Dick, excitedly. "Hello, it's getting dusk. Well, of all the fascinating hide-and-seek games, this has beat the band. Am I lost? I can't stop to guess. I'm certainly right on the verge of the critical discovery. Ouch! ouch! whoop! I'm there! I've run down the cache—it's yonder!"

Dick had broken through the wall of brush with many a scratch and stumble, but he found his persistency rewarded.

Forty feet distant, in the center of a clear space, was a tree.

Such a tree! It seemed to be the grandfather of every other tree in the forest—portly, immense, gray with moss and lichens, wrinkled with knobs of bark burnished seemingly by the rains and snows of a century.

On its great trunk face were as many as ten tin arrows. Time had partly corroded the surface of these, but there were spots where the rust had not fallen, and bright metal flashes caught the dying glow of the day, and seemed to urge Dick forward to seize the fruits of a mighty victory.

"I've found the place!" declared Dick, fervidly.

He came up to the tree and inspected the arrows. Yes, here was the final goal indeed.

For the little indicators no longer followed the points of the compass. They were headed neither north nor west now, but up.

Up Dick locked, along the tree.

"Hello!" he gloated, peering still more sharply.

The shaggy bark was penetrated every three feet by driven-in

iron staples, just big enough to admit a human foot, just strong enough to sustain a human form.

Dick followed this strange ladder with his eye.

"Up there is what I've come for, up there is old Aaron Bird's real cache. What shall I find?" breathed Dick, excitedly.

The man who had made the arrows had made them with a purpose. The same hand had evidently put those steps in place.

There was no fiction to the X-ray cache. The hidden "something" was a reality.

Like a new Jack-and-the-bean-stalk character, Dick Barry looked up the immense tree.

He placed his foot on the first step of the mysterious ladder.

CHAPTER XX.

FREED AND TRAPPED.

Dick Barry started up the great forest tree, his mind in a vivid turmoil of suspense.

A more critical and interesting moment he could not well imagine.

"One, two, three minutes," he breathed ardently, "and I shall know!"

What?

The X-rays photograph had mapped out this island, the little tin arrows had pointed to this tree and the iron steps showed that the singular trail could only end way up among its gnarled, spreading branches.

What lay there, what some hollow or cranny might conceal, Dick could only guess.

Whatever it was, it belonged to Dick by right of gift, and he was delighted to get directly on the track of Bird's cache, or hiding place, before the blind man and his cohorts had probably even got started.

The staples were not very far apart, but the fourth one Dick reached drew out from the section of rotted bark where it happened to be placed.

"Why, these are home-made, too," he murmured, inspecting the rudely-curved ends. "It just occurs to me having helped Bird work rods like these down to a point on the anvil once. He must have done the bending later."

Ten feet from the ground branches started out—branches thicker than his body, forming a natural platform.

Dick looked for some development at this point, but none materialized. Those regular iron steps mounted higher, higher, higher, until they were lost in a mass of luxuriant leaves.

"He's put it far enough from the ground, anyway," soliloquized Dick.

He must have gone fully thirty feet, and was getting his nautical acrobatic agility in trim for a true Jack-tar climb the remainder of the way, when a noisy hum made him look around.

The hum changed to a droning sound, and then to an angry, warning buzzing. Dick thought of snakes, birds and animals. Something flew against his face.

"Insects—the stinging pests—whew! they're sticking me full of holes."

Dick held on with one hand, and, grabbing off his cap, beat out with the other.

To his amazement and even alarm this action brought augmented numbers to the attack. Hundreds, thousands of active winged creatures pounced down at him.

They hovered and swarmed persistently, they began to cling, two, three, four deep all over his clothing.

"Bees!" cried Dick. "Ouch! Gracious!"

The air was actually darkened by clouds of insects. The necessity of fighting them off halted Dick's upward progress.

He did not attempt to resume it. So serious was the situation that he thought only of getting away from the swarming myriads before he was stung to death.

Already a dozen acute dagger points of pain shot through face and hands. Dick descended a step and then another. He could not go fast enough. The enraged insects would not subside.

"Oh, I've got to get away from this!" cried Dick, smarting and wincing. "They're just furious, and as to crowds—they seem to have signaled all the bees in Michigan!"

Dick lost his head just here. His foot touching a big limb extending straight out, straight out on it he ran, snapped off a verdured branch, and beat at his enemies with vigor.

They pressed on him just the same. He kept backing. No

matter how actively he employed the weapon, some of the bees would get past its sweep and dart for his exposed flesh.

"It's a drop to the ground," decided Dick, desperately. "How far is it?"

He looked down. The daylight was getting a trifle dim, and the spot underneath was shadowed by the foliage, but he could calculate that by hanging by his hands, a drop twenty feet to the soft turf would be no great risk.

He swung to a limb that afforded an easy hand clasp.

Noting where he might land, Dick made due haste in his observations, for the bees had him at full disadvantage now.

"There's a bump. Anthill? Maybe moss-covered boulder," he muttered. "A little farther out on the limb. That's it!"

Just about to let go, Dick held firmer. From the brush fringing the opening, out there popped an animal.

Wolf or fox, and one of the two it was, it whisked over the ground like a shadow, and half halted, almost under him. Just then Dick uttered a sharp cry of pain.

A dozen bees darted at his clinging hands at once.

So excruciating was the agony caused by the massed stings that the muscles of his hands involuntarily relaxed.

In that swift shoot through the air Dick was conscious that he might be leaving one form of peril to tumble straight into another.

He landed without damage, his feet striking first, but penetrating the earth so deep that he stumbled and sat down with a bump.

The bees were no longer in evidence. That was one comfort.

Dick's thoughts turned instantly to the animal he had seen a minute before. He peered sharply about.

Whiff! A furry blur seemed making a startled scoot for cover.

A whisking tail fluttered three feet from his eyes, and the animal presence vanished like thin air.

"Why, how, where did it go?" gaped the bewildered Dick.

He strained his gaze. It became fixed on the slight elevation in the ground he had noticed when aloft.

It was a rock, a flat, large slated fragment, probably proceeding far under and along the turf.

Its raised end was velvet clad with thick moss, and some of this showed freshly scratched off.

There was a hole just under its extending end, a small aperture framed with grasses that nearly covered it like a netting.

"The animal went in there," reflected Dick. "I scared it, eh? Then it can't be dangerous; but all the same I'll not linger hereabouts. I'll get back to the boat and bring the crowd—oh, crickety, will I?"

Would he? At least not just yet, and at all events not without adding another startling episode to the dramatic list of the hour.

For as Dick started to get up his cheek blanched, his hair began to rise and he felt his heart go thump-thump! like a sledge-hammer and then stop short.

Lifting his eyes, Dick saw seated at the four points of the compass, facing him squarely, not ten feet away—

Four enormous bears.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRITICAL MOMENT.

At first Dick decided that his ideas had got topsy-turvy from the fall from the tree and were playing him tricks.

A second look at his uncomfortable associates convinced him, however, that he was facing four big real facts.

The bears were monsters. They had been running fast, for they panted heavily; they had bolted into the clearing in a hurry, for a break showed in the shrubbery.

"They were chasing the fox or wolf," muttered Dick.

Here was an ideal predicament for an ambitious boy, something worth telling about later, yet Dick did not like it one bit.

He put his right hand on the ground to get a purchase for a sudden spring to his feet.

The nearest bear closed its jaws with a click like the snap of a gunlock, and its companions acted as if bent on an immediate narrowing of the circle.

"What shall I do?"

Dick blurted out the desperate query, answered by incipient growls.

Every direction was closed to him; he had not so much as a stick for a weapon.

In this dilemma Dick fancied he discerned a refuge from present difficulties.

Three feet away was the moss-covered rock overhanging the opening in the ground.

Cave, burrow or pit, the animal he had first noticed had disappeared into it. There might be room for one more.

He threw himself—or rather, made a dive forward, squarely headed for the hole, went through the aperture, and landed on the damp bottom of a pit.

The paw of one of the bears dealt his vanishing foot a blow, and the same animal seemed investigating his sudden disappearance.

The same paw came down and groped about. Then it was withdrawn, and a savage dab enlarged the aperture, sending down a shower of sand and root fibers.

"I'm caged!" ruminated Dick. "Ugh!"

Something moist and hot seared his hand. A swift turn made Dick thrill.

"The animal that I saw!" he panted, springing to his feet.

Two glowing eyeballs shone right at his side; a grinding mutter came from behind them.

"It must be a wolf—this is his den!" breathed Dick, apprehensively. "I'm doubly trapped!"

He backed to the crumbling side of the pit. The little specks of light followed him. They made him think of the Lightning Bug.

"He's coming!" yelled Dick, dodging, as he felt two rows of sharp-pointed teeth graze his sleeve, and he threw out both hands.

"There's just one thing to do," he determined, "fight!"

How he summoned the nerve to grab for the throat of his new enemy and the strength to hold on he did not pause to analyze, but a minute later Dick found himself astride the wolf and pressing his fingers together tightly as he could.

The animal was not formidable in size, for despite its scratching paws and wiry body twists, Dick was able to keep it under.

Its courage and ferocity, too, seemed to ooze out as it recognized a master, for its snarls turned to whines and a tremor was perceptible.

"It's cowed, but I don't dare let up on it. My fingers are getting numb with the pressure. Ah!" muttered Dick, "those fellows up there are on some new move."

The half of the pit roof that was formed of earth was thin and fragile, for, as the bears tramped across, their heavy tread sent down a shower of loose dirt.

One of them was especially pertinacious. He kept pawing at the entrance, and had got it so enlarged that he could poke his head below the surface.

Suddenly there was a terrific commotion. It so startled Dick that he let go the wolf and sprang to his feet.

Half of the ponderous body of the bear had come flopping down through the aperture.

Dick dodged aside, afraid of being crushed, but he saw that the abrupt descent was not intentional.

A great piece of the roof had given way with Bruin, precipitating the accident, but the animal clung tenaciously to the edge of the rock.

The wolf, released, had sprang up frantic. It ran against Dick and he mistook its terror for an attack.

"I'd rather face the bears outside than both bears and wolf in this den of darkness," Dick told himself.

But how to get out? He could not reach the edge of the opening unaided. He sprang up to try it. As he did so, the bear's tail whipped across his face.

"If you go I go," breathed Dick, and seized the tail and clung to it.

What followed, except a frightful roar, Dick remembered later as a sort of jumble.

He theorized that the three other bears had massed about their clinging comrade.

At all events, with a suddenness that was appalling, the whole earth section of the pit roof caved in.

Three giant bodies toppled and rolled indiscriminately. The thud of the falling earth, their frightened roars and the yelps of the wolf, made the air a babel.

Fear of being crushed caused Dick to act blindly, but sure. He grabbed the long fur of the bear about the tail. Its body, inclined at an angle, was a broad platform.

He got up a foot, made a spring, landed on the grass and—flew.

Whither? The query took vivid form. Not to the trees—he had not forgotten the bees which were there.

First through the break in the brush, for a parting glance at the furious monsters in the pit warned him not to remain in that locality.

"The boat, the boys, old Daffodil!" panted Dick, as he ran. "But which way is the boat? Which is the north? Hark!"

Toot-toot—toot-toot—toot-toot!

The whistle of the *Meteor!* Dick's face brightened. Old Danny was signaling the mooring place of the boat for the benefit of the absent adventurer.

"It's me," Dick was just able to falter, as, dripping with perspiration, staggering like a drunken man, half an hour later he bolted from a copse to fall flat before a camp-fire on the beach.

Hurt? No. Skeered? Slightly. What? Bears. And wolves. And bees.

Anxious Danny got the story out of Dick in jerks. When Dick came to tell of the tree—the tree that was the grandfather of every other tree in the forest, Tom Green was dancing with suspense, Elmer's mouth was agape as if catching flies, and Frank was trembling with suppressed excitement.

"Young cap'n," proclaimed old Daffodil, his face all a-beam, "I reckon you have touched port."

"It looks as if I've run down Bird's cache," admitted Dick.

"Looks so? Mate, you're snug on that tack as a skipper with his cargo under hatches and all dues paid."

Tom and the others were for an immediate return to the scene of action. Daffodil put his foot down firmly here. Dick was too tired out, and "bears and wolves weren't in the original specifications." Dick doubted if he could locate the big tree in the dark.

He was soon sound asleep in a hammock swung between two trees. When he awoke at daybreak breakfast was ready, and all the others were up, anxious to renew explorations without delay.

They gave evidence of preparation for the journey. Daffodil had burnished a rifle that was an heirloom when his grandfather gave it to him; Elmer wore a cutlass that had seen the Malay peninsula, and, "incidentally, a few Malays," old Danny affirmed; Frank was armed with a short boat hook, and Tom bore a mysterious parcel under his coat.

"See here, Dick," he pleaded, as, after securing everything about the boat, they started inland, "will you let me go up the tree with you? I'm crazy to be in at the start."

"Why," laughed Dick, "you can go up first, all alone, if you want to."

"Honest?" beamed Tom.

"Yes, honest. Maybe, if the bees get their fill of fight on you, I may be able to make a safe journey."

"Done!" chuckled Tom. "I'll risk the bees. Remember, no backing out?"

"Not a bit of it."

Dick kept his word. When they reached the big tree his comrades were in various stages of excitement, but Tom was fairly hopping with suspense.

"Go ahead!" smiled Dick. "The path's plain. Up that ladder."

Tom reached the first tree notch with an exuberant shout.

"Pioneer, if you like. I prefer cautious progress, only," warned Dick, "look out for the bees."

"Will I? Ha, ha! Didn't know I thought of that, did you? How's that, Dick Barry?"

"Tom, it's a stroke of genius!" cried Dick, admiringly.

Tom had revealed the secret of his hidden bundle. He had spent two hours before daylight making a bee-keeper's face guard out of wire and mosquito netting.

Drawing on a pair of old gloves, he was ready to meet a whole army of bees if necessary.

"There they are, the pests!" exclaimed Dick, observing a swarm hovering higher up.

"I guess I'll let Tom make the exploration," Dick spoke down to the others.

They watched Tom go up, up, up. Then a bunch of foliage shut him out, and then there echoed a shout.

"Hello!" came floating down.

"Hello, yourself!" hailed back Dick.

"I've arrived."

"Where?"

"At the end of the ladder."

"Well, what is there?"

"A big hole, and—I'll tell you in a minute."

There was a silence of vast suspense. Suddenly, startlingly there sounded an ear-splitting yell.

"Something's happened!" cried Dick.

"Tom's in trouble," nodded Elmer.

Dick got ready to go aloft, bees or no bees.

He was making a mask of a handkerchief, when there came down a hail not quite so exuberant as Tom's first utterance.

"Hello!" he shouted. "I'm coming down."

"Have you found out—" began Dick.

"Yes."

"What's in the hole?"

"Yes."

"What—what?" called the eager voices of the peering watchers in unison, and they bent ears sharply to catch the response.

"Hurrah!" shouted Frank, and tossed up his cap.

"He said 'Money!'" cried Dick, fluttering.

"Yes, 'Money,' sure!" assented Elmer.

Old Daffodil, his eye cocked aloft, tried to maintain the true dignity of age and experience, but his face creased with eager smiles.

Tom's feet came past the intervening foliage. He paused to disentangle his arms from some hindering twigs.

"Oh, do hurry up!" called out Frank. "We're dying with suspense to know about the money—"

"The what?" cried down Tom.

"The money."

"What money?"

"That you said the hole in the tree was filled with."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I didn't say there was money up there," reaffirmed Tom.

"You did," as stanchly vociferated Frank.

"If you didn't say 'money,' what did you say?"

"Honey!"

CHAPTER XXII.

HONEY.

"Honey?"

"Oh, pshaw!"

"That makes a difference."

"Slightly."

Thus spoke Dick, the two Winstons and old Daffodil in turn as Tom's depressing correction came floating down.

It was a wet blanket to high-strung hopes, and they did not pay much attention now to their descending comrade.

Tom as the bearer of bad news, and Tom as the messenger royal of good luck laden with shekels, were two vastly different persons.

They were staring grousomely one at the other, as Tom jumped from the fourth round of the ladder.

"Goodness gracious!" bolted out Elmer in a kind of a shriek.

Tom was a sight. From head to foot he was cased in a sticky, waxy covering. It smeared his face, plastered his hair and dripped from him in strings and patches.

"Why—why—" spluttered the petrified Daffodil.

"Oh, that's nothing," mumbled Tom, with a sickly smile, poking a wad of the stuff out of one eye.

"Say!" exclaimed Frank, "I thought you said there was honey up there?"

"There is."

"You seem to have brought it all down with you."

"Ha! ha! pretty good. Boys, I—I slipped and fell in," stammered Tom.

He was a laughable object, but Dick did not laugh. His mind was on the cache.

"Look here, Tom, you've a facility for blundering into trouble."

"That's me," candidly confessed the culprit.

"Just explain what this muss and mixture means. You went up?"

"Of course."

"The ladder ended?"

"At a broken-off branch."

"Go ahead."

"Hole, darkness. I leaned over too far, I tumbled in, I yelled, got out. That's old Bird's cache."

"Eh? eh? What's that you say?" ejaculated Daffodil, pricking up his ears. "That's the cache?"

"Isn't it?"

"Bless me!" muttered the old sailor, thoughtfully, "and that was all you came across?"

"All? Say!" cried Tom, getting excited, "I went in four feet. Honest, I believe there's enough honey in that tree to stock a city, load a ship to—sell for a fortune!"

"Young cap'n," spoke Daffodil, buoyantly, "I see a new light."

"Do you?"

"A regular binnacle two-header, reflector and all. That hole is the cache, that stuff the lad's sampled is the contents—in other words, and royal good words, too, just as Benny Bubbles said, 'portable property,' old Bird's hidden treasure is, fust and foremost—a bee tree."

There is a glitter to gold that dazzles, a magic about old doublets and pieces of light and melted silver candlesticks that fascinates, so, to be sure, Dick could not help but heave a sigh at contrasting his high ideas of hidden treasure with the prosaic outcome of the moment.

But an hour later, when he began dimly to comprehend the importance of their find, he was bubbling over with satisfaction.

"I fancied it all along," declared Daffodil. "Old Bird's fortune was prospects, and did you ever see a finer one than this, now? When he went away on them there mysterious errands it was to locate this, that and the other. Here's honey. Good! What may not the next cache produce? I'd rather be a merchantman than a buccaneer any day, and that old tree may be worth a whole chest of treasure trove."

It was only after Dick had made a personal investigation that he began even dimly to comprehend what the honey represented in dollars and cents.

It was of a verity one of nature's most profuse storehouses. There were, apparently, barrels of the stuff, tons of it, and Daffodil made him figure what it meant delivered on the wharf at Detroit.

He advised the removal of the telltale arrows—the obliteration of all signs of their visit.

"There's your snug fortune, safe as if in a bonded warehouse till you come back prepared to cargo it," said Daffodil; "and meantime, ho, for the next cache on the chart!"

It was wonderful with what exuberant briskness the boys planned and worked, as they got ready to leave the island.

If they had found money, jewels, gewgaws, it might have demoralized them. Sudden wealth, acquired without labor, is lightly valued, soon wasted.

But here was tangible, legitimate value—here, if the other caches produced anything, was business just fitted to the capacity of their stanch little craft.

"Is anything more delightful than this?" voiced Tom, inspiringly. "Why, Dick, we'll be like the old explorers—coming back richly laden from every voyage. Bird left you a cinch, he did. I've seen bee trees, but that one's a whopper. Now we're headed for Sugar Island. What's that going to produce? We've got a bonanza and a delightful riddle all in one."

Sugar Island was an enigma for two days. No guiding arrows were found here, and the party were about to abandon the search when Tom came across an excavation.

They explored; then Daffodil guessed out the situation.

"Iron ore—looks like a good vein of hematite," he announced. "Any good? It's a salable prospect, which, when seen, make a note of, as old Bubbles would say. Number three, Dick. Where do we go now?"

"Virgil."

"Been there. It's the forlornest of the group. What the old prospector can have found there is a mystery to me."

Blazed trees were the guiding posts at Virgil. When they narrowed investigation down to close results they were compelled to accept a little gully with crevices all a-glitter as the spot Bird had meant to emphasize in his chart.

"It's isinglass scrap," averred Daffodil. "Know what that is? Well, it bears the same relation to mica that peat does to soft coal."

"Is it worth anything?" questioned Dick.

"As packing for axles and general lubricant, I guess yes!" declared Daffodil. "A cargo of that stuff is quite a comfortable spec."

On the following Saturday evening the *Meteor* came to port at an inlet on the Michigan mainland.

"Well, mates," spoke Daffodil, "we'll take a rest, count results and make a fresh start Monday. So far the X-rays map hasn't missed a p'int. What a week we've had of it."

The record was a lively one, for a fact. It had seen a visit to seven of the points indicated on Bird's map.

At Eagle Island they had evidently discovered Bird's fourth cache in burned-down bee trees. Pearl Island was a curiosity. The boys here ran across Bird's find in the shape of an immense mushroom bed. It was a natural thriving place of the esculent, and, Daffodil claimed, of itself represented an industry that would enrich half a dozen men.

The sixth and seventh points visited were two small islands near to the one last visited. On one a great nut grove seemed to have been worth investigating by Bird, on the other they located a cave leading under a great cliff.

"Lads," declared Daffodil, after exploring it, "way back in the recess of that place is ice. There's only a little just now, but I'm satisfied that, ordinarily, there's a supply clear up to July. Now, that's not a bad speculation. We've got a variety, anyhow—honey, iron, isinglass, mushrooms, nuts and ice."

"And the king of them all to hear from yet," said Tom. "You know Badger Bay particularly is marked on the map, and there's some writing about it that's half blurred out."

"Yes, I have high hopes of Badger, somehow," observed Dick.

They started up steam very early Monday morning. It was something of a run to Badger Bay, a point on the Michigan mainland, and it was not until toward late afternoon that they reached its shores.

It proved to be the most fertile, and yet wildest, of any place yet visited. The tree, shrub and flower growths were very luxuriant.

"Now, then, lads, I see you're eager to make a dash into the woods," spoke Daffodil, as they landed. "Go ahead. I'll get things in trim for moving camp traps ashore."

Dick and his companions took a superficial scurry through the nearest belt of timber.

Pickles had caught the exploring fever along with the rest and bounded ahead, starting up game and enjoying the ramble grandly.

Dick whistled for him as they decided on a return to the camp.

A series of sharp barks answered, and the even intonation told that Pickles was stationary.

This was unusual, for Pickles ordinarily came promptly on call. Dick whistled again. There was a second answering hail, but no appearance.

"He's treed a coon or run across a rabbit burrow," said Tom. "Let's find out."

The barking guided them. Then it came to a sudden stop, but, keeping on, they entered a glade and saw Pickles.

That is, a part of him. His tail was wagging a mute signal of distress, his hind paws were waving wildly.

Two feet up from the ground Pickles' head was wedged tightly into a hole in a tree.

"However did he get in that fix?" cried Tom, rushing to the rescue.

Dick was gazing steadfastly about him.

"He was looking for something," he declared, slowly. "Say, boys, some one has camped here within twenty-four hours."

"Eh? how do you know?" asked Tom.

"See, the ashes of a fire, the remnants of a meal; and, see this—My!"

Dick picked up two pieces of a broken stick, too round and smooth to be of natural growth.

The explosive word made all hands look at him; his working face, as he regarded the fragments of wood, satisfied them that he had made a discovery startling to himself.

"This cane tells—" he began.

"Cane?" repeated Tom.

"Yes. It's plain sailing and everything our own way no longer," proclaimed Dick, in rising tones of excitement.

"What do you mean, Dick?"

"We've got company. There's somebody else on the island. We're shadowed or anticipated."

"Why, who by?"

"The owner of that cane, for one, for I've seen it before."

"And who is he?"

Dick's forcible reply sent a vague thrill through the last one of his auditors:

"The Lightning Bug!"

CHAPTER XXIII.
FOUND!

The Lightning Bug.

A dead silence fell over the little group as Dick Barry made an announcement which, if true, meant serious menace to the expedition.

"That fellow's bobbed up again, eh?" Tom was the first to mutter.

"This is his cane," declared Dick, inspecting the broken pieces of wood.

"Sure of that?"

"Yes; I never saw it but once—the day he came to our little shop at Decatur—but I haven't forgotten it. Here's the hooked nail and the club knob. Boys, this is an important discovery. One of you run back to the boat and report to Daffodil."

"And bring him here?" questioned Frank, starting at the word. "I think he'd better come."

Tom went to where Pickles was vainly endeavoring to extricate his head out of the knothole in the tree, through which, in some mysterious manner, he had got it wedged.

"There you are," he spoke, releasing the animal. "Went after a gopher or squirrel, I suppose. That's right, think it over for a warning, old fellow, and don't try it again."

Pickles sneaked to a distance, and, his ruffled and scratched head on one side, regarded the knothole with speculative interest.

Dick proceeded to investigate the spot. He was as intent on ground marks, tree signs and trail tokens as some expert scout.

"You look as serious as if a band of Indians were after us," spoke Tom.

"I don't like the looks of things any better," asserted Dick.

"Why not?"

"Well, what I just said is true."

"That horrible creature, the Lightning Bug, has been here?"

"Positively. That's his cane. Broke it over the Carters' backs, of the back of their dog, in one of his ungovernable fits of rage, I suppose."

"Oh!" muttered Tom, his eyes dilating, "they're here, too?"

"Some of them are."

"I don't see how you know."

"Look there," spoke Dick, pointing. "You yourself see that a camp-fire was here lately."

"That's plain enough."

"The bent grass shows that four or five persons have been sitting down eating. Three cigarette stumps—that's the trade-mark of the three Carters, any time."

Just then Frank reappeared with Daffodil.

"Hey, young cap'n! what's all this I hear?" was the old sailor's initial demand.

Dick told of his discoveries and suspicions. Daffodil rubbed his shining pate with vigor as he pondered over the outlook.

"Dick's right, I reckon," he told the crowd. "This here Mr. Bug's on the scene, and he's not alone. Now, according to maritime usage, they are pirates and mutineers. As such we shall treat them."

"What are they here for, do you suppose?" projected Tom.

"What are we here for?" insinuated Daffodil. "Mr. Bug, as we know, has the original pasted-down board document the same as our map. Has he read it? Likely."

"But he had no X-rays to read it by?"

"Say, lad," pronounced Daffodil, solemnly, "maybe that evil eye of his is a whole X-ray gimlet in itself. According to young cap'n it's a blazer. Leastways, he's quicker'n powder as a schemer. He's read it sure, and he's here sure, and his being here tells us one sure fact."

"What's that?" breathed Tom.

"That Badger Bay is the keynote, the central block of the whole system. The main prospeck is here, I reckon. The photograph shows double marks, dots and crosses when it indicates this here place, and there was some blurred writing about them. Say, Mr. Bug made that writing out, say, anyway, he got the hint that it was on the chart, and knew more than we did, and hasn't wasted time on honey, and ice, and such, but is hot and heavy after the gist of the matter, the principal prospeck."

"Then you think there is an exceptionally valuable cache in this vicinity?" questioned Dick.

"Young cap'n," nodded Daffodil, confidently, "I think that here we shall find the real milk in the cocoanut and no mistake."

"Unless the Lightning Bug anticipates us."

"Unless, 'zactly."

"Don't let him!" vociferated Tom, all ablaze with anticipation.

"Well said. He shan't. No trespassers allowed! How was the pirate craft headed? Ah, nor' by nor'east. Who'll go for my rifle and the rest of the arms? You, Tom, and hurry back. We'll just trail up these rascally buccaneers."

"That suits," declared Tom, bolting away.

He came back carrying an armful, including Daffodil's gun and Elmer's cutlass.

"I hope we shan't have to come to blows with those fellows," remarked Elmer, who was timid.

"Not if they mind their own business," vouchsafed Daffodil. "Naturally we'd be glad to larn jist how much they know, but, meet them or miss them, our plain duty is to locate the Badger Bay cache before they do."

"After all, it may be that Dick's mistaken," suggested Frank. "There are so many canes in the world alike."

"I hardly think I am," spoke Dick. "Everything fits—the blind man's plans in Detroit, his possession of the writing, the number here at the camp spot, and Van—Don't scowl, Elmer, don't frown, Frank—I only say," and Dick sighed, "I wonder if Van is with them. Come on, boys. Here, Pickles."

Pickles had not stirred an inch from the pose he had assumed after Tom had extricated his head from the knothole in the tree. He did not stir now; like a statue he squatted, and his eyes were still fixed on that knothole.

"Do you hear me, Pickles?" called Dick.

The animal whined uneasily, and started to obey, but with evident reluctance.

"Acts queer, don't he?" observed Tom.

"As if that tree hypnotized him," supplemented Frank.

"Guess he so nearly strangled he can't quit thinking of it," suggested Elmer.

"Wait, boys," spoke Tom, holding up a warning hand. "Don't urge the dog for a minute, Dick. There's something to this."

"Something to what?"

"Pickles' actions."

Pickles started for his master sideways, keeping an oblique range on the tree. Then he uttered a growl, as if forced to proceed against his inclinations.

"See here, Pickles, old fellow," called out Tom, going up to the tree and slapping it once or twice, "what is it? Seek! seek! What is it?"

Pickles dove back for the tree. He ran around it, sprang, yelped, made a dive for the knothole, but remembering his recent dilemma, jumped back, growling spitefully at it.

"Never saw him act that way before over the fattest ground-hog that ever waddled," declared Tom. "Don't feel like a burrow, either," he continued, poking cautiously in the hole.

"Oh, come on, Tom! We've no time to lose," ordered Dick, impatiently.

"Ho! ha! hello!"

They saw Tom's eyes dilate, his mouth pucker.

"See here!" he cried, pulling out a wad of something encased in a piece of cloth.

"I shold say!" voiced Frank, making a jump to his side.

"Why, it's a little cache all on its own hook!" muttered Daffodil, himself advancing.

All curiosity, the quartet watched Tom.

Their expectancy changed to wide amazement as he slipped some knots and threw open the ends of the cloth.

"Greenbacks—whew! What a wad of them!" shouted Frank.

"Money!" exclaimed Elmer.

"Money this time—no honey, but cash," fluttered Tom. "That's what Pickles was after."

He lifted up the crumpled heap of bank notes. Around them ran a paper band.

"Fresh from a bank—who ever left it here?" proceeded Tom, excitedly.

"Decatur Bank," were the words on the paper strip. A date, an amount in red, rubber stamp letters followed.

"If this is one of Bird's hidings, now—" began Daffodil, when Tom interrupted him.

"Boys," he cried, "I know."

"Know what? Whose it is? how it came there?" demanded Dick.

"Yes."

"Tell, then."

BRAVE AND BOLD.

"Why," continued Tom, his color coming and going with vivid excitement, "it's the stolen capital of the Decatur Improvement Company—it's our lost three hundred and fifty dollars!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FACE TO FACE.

"Our lost money!" gasped Elmer Winston, unbelievingly.

"True as turtles," nodded Tom, in triumph.

In wondering silence each one noted bill after bill as Tom flipped them apart.

"You see?" he inquired, "three hundred and fifty dollars."

"The exact amount!" breathed Frank.

"Date on the strip the day we lost it," continued Tom, "name of the bank the one that Van Merton drew it from."

"Then Van Merton is innocent!"

Dick Barry almost shouted the words under the influence of a joy that overpowered him.

"Maybe," muttered Tom, dubiously.

"I don't quite see how you make that out," said Elmer.

Dick had been carrying Daffodil's gun. He dropped it now. For weeks he had been wearing a mask of seeming indifference and forgetfulness regarding Van. He dropped that, too.

"Boys," he said, his face working visibly, "I've got to speak out what's been oppressing me for a long time."

"Do it, mate; we're friends," encouraged Daffodil.

"I never believed Van Merton a thief. When the note came tied around Pickles' neck I believed it less. Now—why, now," cried Dick, "Van Merton stands clear as crystal, square with the world, and who dare say no?"

"I don't see—" again began Elmer.

"Is that our missing money?" demanded Dick, sharply.

"I suppose it is."

"All of it?"

"Every dollar, I guess."

"And we've got it back?"

"It looks so."

"It is so. Shame on your unjust suspicions!"

"But how did it come here?"

"How? Ah! that's one more of the dark mysteries that have hedged poor Van in. Never mind how. It's here, it's recovered, and it proves one thing—if Van drew it with wicked intent, was it to hide? No, no, to squander! Is it squandered? Not a cent of it! Boys, I can hold up my head again, I can feel proud of the misjudged friends who never needed a true friend worse, and I can pursue the Lightning Bug, the Carters and all that wretched crew with better heart than ever, for Van is with them, and Van must be got away from them, and then you'll know what I feel sure of—he's innocent of stealing that money, he's true blue to the core, but he's the victim of cruel circumstances, just as he wrote."

Tom and the Winstons exchanged glances. They recognized the true depths of their leader's fidelity, they saw that in treating Van as a criminal they were dealing Dick blows hard to bear.

"I say," ejaculated the impulsive Tom, "I'm sort of ashamed of myself!"

"I'd do one thing if I were you, mates," interrupted Daffodil, gently. "Dick's heart is on his friend; it's the manly thing to respect his feelings and help him prove Van Merton innocent if it can be done."

"That's a go," exclaimed Tom, "but it's an awful muddle! Here's our money, but how came it in that tree? How—Oh, bother, it would take the seventh son of the seventy-seventh granddaughter of the seven hundred and seventy-seventh child of the original gypsy fortune teller to even guess out the pot of trouble Van is in!"

Dick bade Tom stow the money safely away, and resumed the pilotage of his friends on the trail of their enemies.

And Van. Yes, it was a hunt for Van now from start to finish, he promised himself. He knew that the money could have come in that tree in only one way—it had been placed there by Van, hidden there by Van to keep it out of the clutches of his rascally companions.

To Dick at least, as they pressed on, the trail was less a chase in the interest of Aaron Bird's secrets than a search for the friend to whose rescue he now resolved to devote heart and soul.

Dick was pleased at Tom's demeanor. The latter seemed

anxious to show that he was willing to consider Van all right till he was proven all wrong.

He was projecting a theory wild and wooly enough to fit a blood-curdling dime novel plot about Van, when Dick happened to note the wand, stick or weapon, with sundry waves of which Tom was emphasizing his excited remarks.

"Why, what's that?" inquired Dick, his eyes opening wide.

"Oh, that? that? it's—it's—a stick," replied Tom, somewhat embarrassed.

"I see it is. Where did you get it?"

"From the boat. You know—"

"Yes, I know. It's Bird's diving rod."

"That's it," nodded Tom. "It's the end brass-bradded, tip-feathered thing you found in the old brewery vault the night you broke it open for the blind man. I told you it might be some good some time, for I've heard wonderful things about such, and I brought it aboard the boat with the rest of our traps."

"And what are you unearthing it for now?"

"Oh, well," stammered Tom, "truth is, I'm sort of taken with these magical things, and if—if, mind you—we should catch the Lightning Bug, I'm determined to make him tell if it does divine, and how. See? He'd know, for he recognized it as Bird's that first night you saw him."

"Cautious, boys!" just here warned Daffodil. "I smell tobacco smoke."

They halted and crowded together against some bushes. Pickles' nose was bristling. Tom grabbed and held him.

Daffodil bent his ear, sniffed, crept forward and crooked his finger toward Dick.

The latter noiselessly joined him, held his breath and stared eagerly through a screen of vines and bushes.

He could smell the tobacco smoke now, and he could see the smokers.

There were three of them—Kid, Butch and Tip Carter, and they faced the terror of Dick's life—the Lightning Bug.

Yes, there was that great, wolfish face, the mottled eyeballs, blank and expressionless in the light of day; the great hooks of fingers, always working as if anxious to clutch and destroy something.

Almost a cry broke from Dick's lips as he looked beyond the quartet, for, lying flat watching the sky drearily, aimlessly, pale, dejected and thin, was Van Merton.

He was not tied, and the others did not seem to be watching him, therefore Dick decided he was no prisoner.

At the same time he seemed to have no interest in their councils, and that negatived any assumption that he regarded them as chums.

"Go on, you, Kid, you leather-skulled, slabsided mullin head!" sounded the gruff tones of the Lightning Bug. "I'm wrong, am I?"

"If you think looking for a bag is all we've got to do to fish up old Bird's fortune, yes."

"Haven't I eyes?" roared the man.

"One, exactly, but it's a night owl's ogle, and it's off on this scent, old pal. You took the paper off the board very slick with the acids, but the words under Badger Bay were blurred; you have to read them backward. You say, the screed says, 'Sell the bag.' So you go crazy to find a bag somewhere in the thousand odd acres around Badger Bay."

"Don't it say that?"

"Nix."

"What does it say, then?"

"See the boy—that's your clew. 'See the boy.' What boy? I don't know. Where? I can't guess, but if this wild goose amble is going to produce any plunkers, 'See the boy' brings 'em, you hear me!" and Kid Carter flung his cigarette up in the air, caught it deftly in his teeth again, and subsided.

"See the boy!" whispered old Daffodil to Dick; "you hear? Which, when heard, make a note of. What next now? Aha! Oho!"

Daffodil recoiled with one exclamation as a big bulldog bounded between them.

He started up with the other as it leaped beyond, for a wild clamor sounded out.

"Carter's dog! He's tackled Pickles!" breathed Dick.

"Jig's up. Board the enemy!" roared Daffodil.

Immediately there was a babel of commotion that changed the quiet scene to one of vivid turmoil in a second.

In a second, too, the Carters discerned the presence of an enemy.

The three of them grabbed up heavy sticks. From Kid's lips issued some sharp, definite commands.

His Brother Butch grabbed the blind man's arm and ran him into the woods.

Tip sprang to a tree. Leaning thence, he waved his stick to crack the skull of the first member of the intruding party who should happen to come within range.

"Run, get him hid!" cried Kid. "Merton, you leg it," he added threateningly to Van. "Youse come on."

He made a stand, cudgel armed. Tom and the Winstons rushed forward to break down his guard.

Daffodil, making dreadful passes with his old gun, hobbled after them.

Whack! came down Tip's club, and the old tar staggered, made a detour of the agile young ape, and started on the trail of Butch and the blind man.

Dick had eyes for but one member of the party—Van. It seemed as they rested once again on the closest chum he had ever known, that his heart came up in his throat for joy and pity.

"Van! Van!" he cried. "Stop, I must see you!"

What was money, treasure, riches, all Aaron Bird's secrets, all the Lightning Bug's mysteries, to the friendship that burned a living, unquenchable fire in his heart of hearts!

With one poignant look Van regarded him, broke into a sob, and ran from him as if he was the pestilence.

"Do you hear me?" cried Dick, and put after him. "Van Merton, you must stop!"

Van continued on like the wind. Dick caught up with him and grabbed his arm. Van broke away.

The shouts of the others were lost in the distance now, still Dick kept on.

"Stop!" Dick shouted in despair, as he observed that Van was gaining on him. "Just one word—one little question."

"I dare not!" flashed back the fugitive. "No, no, no!"

He stumbled over a log as he spoke. Flat over him fell Dick.

Van squirmed. Dick pinned him, face upward, to the ground.

"Van Merton," he panted, his soul in his eyes, "I've caught you at last!"

CHAPTER XXV. DOWN!

"Let me go!" gasped Van, wildly struggling.

"No," shouted the determined Dick. "Old friend, dear chum, are you crazy?"

"What do you want of me?"

"The truth. What does it mean—the money, your running away from us?"

"The money? I never stole it. I drew it to keep others from stealing it."

"I believe you. I knew all along you were not a thief. We have found the money."

"You have!" cried Van. "I hid it in the tree. I was afraid the Carters would get it. Dick, Dick!" cried Van in tones of such sudden affright that Dick was startled, "let me get back to my—to the blind man! Oh, for mercy's sake don't detain me!"

"You think more of that horrible monster than of us!" exclaimed Dick, reproachfully.

"You don't know what you are saying," faltered Van. "Let me go to him; I've got to. It's death—hanging—if you don't; and keep out of his way. He's a—a murderer already! Oh, pity me, Dick, but never seek me again! I am not fit to look you in the face."

Dick Barry was so shocked by his friend's incoherent statements that he was completely unnerved.

Hanging! Not fit to look him in the face! Terrible words these! He choked up as he strove to speak; he put out his hands, all a-tremble, as both arose to their feet, to detain Van.

And then, ere a blurr as of some haunting horror cleared away from brain and heart, Van had disappeared.

A shout to the north recalled Dick abruptly to a sense of his duty to other friends. It seemed a hail for help from Tom.

He started on a run in that direction, but halted as behind him other shouts approached, and he distinguished the voice of Butch Carter.

"Kid, Tip, Merton!" he was shouting. "I've got the old man to a boat. Hurry, join us!"

A boat! Dick thrilled. Was it their boat, the *Meteor*, Butch Carter meant?

He put out his hand to grab Butch as he burst into view. With a side slap the elder Carter sent Dick spinning and ran on in hot quest of his friends.

Dick did not pursue, but hastened his steps in the direction of the beach.

The *Meteor* was threatened. The blind man had been put aboard to be joined by his cohorts.

Those vandals would think no more of using the jaunty little craft to convey them to a place of safety, and then scuttling it or burning it out of spite, than of upsetting an urchin's toy boat.

As Dick ran on, too, he saw the partial fulfillment of old Daffodil's early afternoon prediction that a hovering storm was about to break.

The sun had gone behind the clouds, a shrill wind was whistling through the timber.

"If I get there first we have the Lightning Bug caged," soliloquized Diek. "Oh, I am too late!"

He voiced the words in alarm as he reached the beach.

A hundred yards ahead was the mooring place of the *Meteor*. Daffodil, sent for in a hurry, had left its shore line secured to a mere sapling.

Butch Carter had set full steam, so as to be ready for instant flight, and stumbling about the engine pit, was the Lightning Bug. Just as Dick saw him with a bound the *Meteor* started out from shore.

It snapped the sapling in two. Unguided, aimed straight as an arrow for the hundred odd islets and protruding rocks guarding one side of the bay, it shot along at full speed.

A roar came from the blind man as the motion threw him prostrate, and Dick chilled with dread.

He now discerned what had transpired. Blindly groping about, the Lightning Bug must have accidentally touched the controlling mechanism. A bat, an owl in even that dim daylight, his veiled senses were powerless to guide him to rectify his terrible error.

"Back ten steps, grope your way! Turn the bar!" shouted Dick, frantically. "You are headed for destruction—you will be dashed to pieces!"

"A trick! a trap!" arose the voice of the frightened passenger. "Help! you knaves! Oh, for eyes! Where am I? Help! help!"

In no way could Dick hope to overtake the boat by swimming. He continued shouting to the blind man.

Half hearing him, floundering all about the deck, groping, raving in mad terror, the miscreant realized his peril and seemed going insane.

Dick's heart came into his mouth as the *Meteor* struck a great rock. It grazed it with only a jar, but ahead loomed up twenty more.

Just then he saw a figure at the rounding sweep of the bay. It skimmed the beach, leaped from rock to rock, and seemed bent on reaching the boat.

"Van!" shouted Dick, a thrill.

Van saw him. He made a slight movement of recognition—the desperate hail of a frantic creature.

Into the water Van jumped clear of the rocks. He was two hundred feet nearer the *Meteor* than Dick. He swam so as to head it off, being at a decided point of advantage to encompass this if he could swim very rapidly.

Dick shivered as he took in the scene. No, Van had miscalculated, he was imperiling his life for nothing. Long before he could reach the side of the boat it would strike on the rocks, and if he was near it the life would be crushed out of him.

Solicitude for his friend made Dick value the boat lightly at that moment.

"Van! Van!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Don't try it! The boat is doomed. Do not sacrifice your life for that wretch!"

"He is—my father!"

Dick reeled with a shock. His father! The secret was out, the mystery of all it had meant for Van was plain now.

Swaying and chilled, Dick's senses became a blur momentarily. Then, his vision clearing, he viewed an awful sight.

As the *Meteor* dashed past the second rock, Van caught up with it.

Dick shook from head to foot with suspense. Would he make it, after all?

Yes, his feet were on the deck. No, an awful crash sounded

BRAVE AND BOLD.

out, and back into the water ten feet, his head striking a projecting rock, Van Merton went—and sank.

A scream like that of a lost soul went up from the deck of the *Meteor*.

It proceeded from the lips of the blind man.

For a single second his white, ferocious face gleamed amid a battering, shattering ruin of planks, rigging and machinery.

Then he was engulfed. The boat lifted high at the bow, crashed like an egg-shell, parted as if snapped squarely in two.

There was a rush of broken timbers to a gurgling whirlpool that seemed to suck them down, and all that was left of the bonny *Meteor* sank from view forever.

And the Lightning Bug with it.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TIN ARROW.

Dick Barry stood aghast on the lonely, storm-driven beach. In one fell swoop he had seen his closest friend, his dreaded enemy and the jaunty boat that was the delight of his heart swallowed up in an appalling vortex of destruction.

"It's awful!" he gasped; and then a sudden swirl of the tempest driving him against a tree seemed to arouse his half-stunned faculties.

"Van!" he cried. "He went down, but—I see him!"

Way over among the rocks the churning waters seemed to buoy up a dark object.

As he had never run before Dick flew down the rounding stretch of beach.

Over twenty slippery, slant-faced rocks he leaped. A slip carried him sheer into the water.

"In time!" he panted, striking out for what seemed a human form. "It's him—it's Van!"

His rescued charge was a dead burden as he made for shore. Dick carried it to the nearest turf and, trembling with anxiety, tried to surmise Van's real condition.

Van was breathing, so he had not become water-choked, but there was a bad wound on the back of his head where it had struck a rock. Dick bound it up with a handkerchief.

With that the rain came, while the wind arose to a hurricane.

One mournful look toward the spot where the *Meteor* had gone down, a second along the deserted shore, and Dick saw that he had nothing to fear from enemies, nothing to hope for from friends.

Van must be his one thought for the present, and he needed better shelter. Dick went into the first thicket. It was growing dusk. He searched for a comfortable burrow or arbor, found a vine-knitted retreat among some trees, and returned for his insensible friend.

"He's gone!"

In consternation Dick stared down at the spot where he had left Van.

A search among the bushes showed no trace of the friend so mysteriously disappeared.

In alarm Dick proceeded up and down the beach, looking everywhere, calling out all the time.

At the end of half an hour he made up his mind that either Van had recovered and wandered inland, or the Carters had discovered him and carried him there.

It seemed useless seeking him in the darkness and storm, and as Dick felt sure that his friends would sooner or later rally to the former mooring place of the *Meteor*, he sat down to a dreary and uncomfortable vigil.

It struck him as decidedly strange when midnight brought no developments, as positively alarming when morning found him as solitary as if he was some desert island castaway.

"I can't understand it," he soliloquized. "If my friends got the best of the Carters they would come back to the boat. If the Carters won the day they would return to get the blind man."

Dick was about as worried and dejected a boy as ever started out to seek his fortune, and found it suddenly snatched from his grasp.

He felt like a clock running backward—as if all the misfortunes of a lifetime had been bulked in the little space of twelve short hours to overwhelm him.

He went into the woods, making a detour of five miles; he lined the beach as great a distance, but discovered not the slightest trace of friend or foe.

Toward noon he came to a good-sized stream emptying into the lake, and followed it up for a mile or so until its banks got steep and hard to climb.

Then, seeking shelter from a fresh dash of rain, Dick snuggled in under a ledge of slate and forgot his troubles in sleep.

They and new ones recurred with a rather sharp waking up.

He was conscious that undue heat centered just where his back came.

"Why, am I afire?" he exclaimed, getting his waking senses on the jump. "Well, there's a mystery for your life—a chimney that's a riddle!"

Dick curiously regarded puffs of light smoke issuing from the direct side of the bank where he had been sleeping.

"I must have blocked it up—been asleep right over a smoke hole," he ruminated. "Smoke hole of what? There's no house, pit or cave anywhere within a hundred feet. Meat cooking, too; I can scent it like a hungry bear. Where does the smoke come from?"

Investigation directly at hand brought no tangible results. There was simply a round burrow or natural cavity that had its outlet here. Its inlet it seemed impossible to trace.

"I'll take a try, anyway," decided Dick.

He traversed the river slope without result; he went over to the other side.

It was a wildwood tangle. Hut or dugout, even solitary camper, there seemed none.

Sitting dejectedly across a dead tree, Dick started as a whistle caught his ear.

"That's human!" he breathed. "Oh, I say—I say!"

Stumbling through thick underbrush, Dick saw a boy carrying a pan of water down into a little gully.

The lad was about Dick's own age, but bronzed like an Indian, coarsely dressed, and shut up his whistling with a suspicious snap of the lips as he halted and stared.

"Say yourself!" he challenged.

"Do you—that is—I want to know—do you own the smoke coming out of the other side of the ridge?" blurted Dick.

"Me?" answered the boy, coldly; "oh, no; you can have it if you want it."

"See here. I'm lost. I'm in terrible trouble. Don't hurry away," as the boy made a movement forward, "I'm really in a desperate fix, I—"

Dick stopped short abruptly. His eyes became glued to the boy's hickory shirt.

Fascinated, agape, he stared and stared, and the other half swung the pan as if to give him a free bath for his insolence.

"Say," called out the boy, his lips puckering belligerently, "are you trying to guy me?"

"I should say not, but where—where did you get that?"

Dick pointed at the boy's shirt front, and the boy looked up and down it blankly.

"Get what!" he demanded, testily.

"That," said Dick, coming forward with one finger pointing rigidly.

He did not pause till he arrived squarely up face to face with the other.

And then his finger tips rested on a twisted metal scrap that, instead of a pin, held the boy's collar together.

"That," repeated Dick, excitedly; "where did you get one of old Aaron Bird's tin arrows?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CLOSE SHAVE.

"Where did I get the tin arrow?" repeated the boy, with a start. "What's that to you?"

"Everything."

"And what do you know about old Aaron Bird?"

"I worked for him—in fact, I may say I am his heir."

"Say!" projected the lad, dropping his pan of water and his suspicions with wonderful celerity. "What's your name?"

"Dick—Dick Barry."

"No!"

"Yes."

"Then Bird sent you?"

"He's dead."

"No!"

"Yes."

They might have stood there saying "no" and "yes" for hours, but Dick was shrewd enough to discern that what he had already said had changed the entire demeanor of the boy.

"Come, you seem to know Bird and to have heard my name before," he remarked.

"Heaps of time! And he's dead? Well, well," murmured the boy, sadly and reflectively; "that's news, and that's why he hasn't been to see me."

"Did he used to come?"

"Did he? I'm his—I mind things for him here."

"What things?"

The boy directed a sharp glance at Dick.

"Wait till I'm sure you're Dick Barry, and I'll tell you."

"I guess I can convince you of that," smiled Dick. "When Mr. Bird died he left a sort of a map. I've been hunting up his caches. Badger Bay was the last one to explore. We got here last night, but happened to run across the Lightning Bug——"

"Who?"

The boy shot out the word as if some one had struck him a blow.

"The Lightning Bug."

"You mean a—a man with one eye—can't see in the daytime, the nyctalop—the felinoctic?"

"The same."

"Say, he isn't here? Say!" urged the boy, grabbing Dick's arms, "he isn't here?"

"He was, but he's dead, too. He was drowned last night."

"Come with me," spoke the boy. "I guess you're all right. He's dead? Oh, what a relief!"

"What have I struck?" ruminated Dick. "Bird's tin arrow, a boy who knows the Lightning Bug and my name, the keeper of Bird's cache at Badger Bay. This boy can tell something startling, I'll bet. Why, what a cozy roost!"

The mystery of the smoke the other side of the cliff was explained as the boy led the way down into the gully.

Its roof and front completely covered with bushes and vines, there rested in an angle of the rocks a small, compact log hut.

"It's a regular hiding place," continued Dick.

"Yes, meant to be. That's why we sent the smoke over on the other side. Come in. Eh? Say, what are you staring at this time?"

"That—that boy!" cried Dick, in profound amazement, peering at Van Merton, asleep on a cot.

"S-sh! no need waking him, although he's had a long sleep. I found him on the beach last night."

"Oh, thanks—thanks!" cried Dick, fervently. "You must have carried him away while I was hunting a shelter."

"A friend of yours?"

"My very best. Well, you're doing some good in the world, if you only knew it."

"Am I?" exclaimed the boy, brightly. "I hope so. I've done wickedness enough."

"Oh, pshaw! you ain't going to make anybody believe that. Who are you, anyway?"

"Dick—oh, Dick! is it you?" proceeded from the cot, and the astonished Van sat up. "Where have I been? Oh, I remember, Dick—is it true that terrible man is dead?"

"Don't get excited, Van; he's dead, and you're in the hands of good friends."

"Friends!" repeated Van, bitterly. "I have no right to friends. Even if he is dead, think of the disgrace. He was a criminal, a terrible one. He killed a man once. The Carters found it out. You see, they knew my history in the city. I never saw my father since mother died. She said he was dead. The Carters claimed not, and that terrible man appeared and convinced me he was my father. They made me stay with them. They threatened if I did not tell about your business, and draw the money, they would send him to the gallows."

"Poor Van!" murmured Dick, sympathetically. "I understand your conduct now."

"I deluded them about the money. They thought it was in the bank, and expected to draw it on a forged check, but were hurried away from Decatur too quickly. Oh, Dick, think of it! the Lightning Bug was a murderer! He coolly confessed it."

"Say," bolted out their host just here, "so you know the Lightning Bug, too?"

"He was my father."

"He was—what?" shouted the boy.

"My father."

"Rather guess not! Are you crazy? Why, he was my father, or, rather, half-father. There's some hocus-pocus here—why, I see it all. The crowd was fooling you; the old villain was up to just such tricks. They played on your fears. Haven't I known him to my sorrow since I was three years old? He was my step-father, and he led me an awful life. For years he kept me with him, beat me, tried to drive me to crime. Two years ago I met Mr. Bird. The Lightning Bug had some deal with him years ago, a sort of smuggling affair, I think, and he hounded Bird to get money from him. Bird hid me away from him here. I was glad to live in a hole in the ground to get out of his clutches. You're mistaken, bub, the Lightning Bug was not your father."

"Oh, can this be true?" cried Van, hopefully.

"I guess it is," nodded Dick. "Go on, my friend," to the boy.

"Marcus Thoms is my name. Mr. Bird told me all about you, and how he was going to bring you here some day, and when he got everything ready, let you into his secrets, and then the three of us would begin the right kind of a life at business. I watched his interests here."

"What interests?" asked Dick, curiously.

"I'll tell you when I'm dead sure you are Dick Barry," promised the other, guardedly.

Dick made him very sure of that by relating all his adventurous story. When he came to tell of the disappearance of his friends, however, Marcus looked serious.

"I don't think you'd better try to do much of anything till you find them," he suggested.

"I'm only too willing to try," affirmed Dick.

"Then let me get you something to eat, and we'll start right out."

Dick was immensely refreshed by the plain but substantial meal set before him. Van wanted to go with them, but Marcus told him he was in no condition for a long tramp.

Dick learned lots concerning Bird's queer plans during a walk to the beach. Bird had just about got things as he wanted them when he died. Marcus said he knew that Bird intended making Dick his heir, had once seen a paper to that effect. Anyway, he was willing to help him get his rights, only—he would not reveal the secret of his trust at Badger Bay till they got back to the hut. Then he would "show" him.

"Show me what?" persisted Dick.

"Something to brighten your eyes, never fear," promised Marcus.

At the mooring place of the *Meteor* they found no trace of the missing parties.

"We'll beat the timber," suggested Marcus. "You take that direction, I'll take this. In two hours come back here."

Dick penetrated the woods. He must have gone three miles with no success, when he sat down against a tree, dead done out.

If he fell asleep he did not know it, if he awoke up again he couldn't guess when or how. It seemed as if his tired senses had led him into a dreamy daze, that was all.

At all events, Dick, opening his eyes in a tired way, opened them wider and wider still as he looked straight ahead and saw something that made his blood run cold.

It was a snake, a genuine rattler, poised not three feet from his face and ready to spring.

Just in that condition where his will power and strength were weakest, Dick for the life of him could not stir.

He had read of the ability of these reptiles to lull, charm and destroy, and these influences oppressed him now.

The baleful, changing eyes of the swaying snake reminded him of the Lightning Bug. He shivered, tried to arouse himself, but could only utter a faint cry.

Then his lids fell. Loss of sleep, lack of food, the shock of startling adventures—all helped to place Dick Barry under the hypnotic spell of the wily, poison-fanged serpent.

His arms fell like lead, his head went sideways like that of a person half dead for the want of sleep.

Then—

Scat.

Smack.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

"Scat!"

Dick opened one eye and saw—Tom Green.

Smack.

He got both on a focus with a descending stick, saw it strike the serpent, and knew he was saved.

"Well, lucky I was near here—lucky I heard your cry. Where have you been?" ejaculated Tom, seizing Dick's hand and pulling him to his feet.

"Hello!" he broke out afresh. "It knocked the rattler, but it's smashed my stick, old Aaron Bird's divining rod. Too bad. I say. Ho! ha! hello! What's this? My!"

Tom Green, picking up the pieces of the divining rod, was surprised to find them hollow.

From one extended a rolled-up paper. Tom drew it out, glared at it, stuck it in his pocket, uttered those fervent aspirations of excitement and turned to Dick as if he had something to say of transcendental importance.

"Dick!" he began, paused, ran to Dick, who was lopping over, and propped him up. "Why, you're about done out!"

Dick felt better when Tom got him out of sight of the dead snake. Then Tom took from his pocket the boatswain's whistle Daffodil had given him, and sounded a dozen calls.

"They're all coming, they'll all be here in a few minutes," he told Dick.

"But where have you been all night?"

"Where? Chasing the Carters—they chasing us. They took old Daffodil prisoner. We caught Kid. They got our gun and held us at bay in a copse. Finally Daffodil played 'possum, suddenly grabbed Tip and Butch, nearly shook the life out of them, old as he is, sent them spinning, sent Kid after them, and they vanished. We are making our way back to the *Meteor*."

The *Meteor*! Dick started grousomely. There was no *Meteor*! And how should he tell old Daffodil of his terrible loss?

He edged all around the subject as the others came up, and he kept them relating their adventures until they got in sight of the beach.

Then Dick blurted out the truth. His three young companions stood aghast. Old Daffodil blinked as if Dick had struck him, uttered a groan, tried to disguise it with a mournful chuckle, and said:

"Fortunes of war, mates. No one's to blame except myself for leaving the boat unguarded."

"Never mind, Mr. Daffodil," spoke Dick, consolingly, "you shall be paid its value just the same."

"Avast there! Am I a miser?" roared the bluff tar. "It's of you boys I'm thinking. But the *Meteor* wouldn't have fitted your ambitious ideas long—you'd soon have wanted a full-rigged bowler, you would."

"Maybe we will have one yet," said Dick. "I'm inclined to think Badger Bay has a big surprise in store for us."

"It hath—it hath!" mumbled Tom to himself, pinching the broken sticks in his pocket and chuckling secretly till Elmer asked him if he had the jumps.

Marcus Thoms was watching on the beach. There was an introduction, and then a general exchange of narratives, and then all hands hurried to the gully hut, anxious to see Van, who stood completely vindicated in their eyes.

When Marcus had seen the ample meal devoured which he promptly set out for the half-famished wayfarers, he put on his cap.

"It will be dark in an hour," he said, "so if you want to see what I've been guarding for Mr. Bird to-night you may as well come along."

"Say, what is it?" queried Tom, eagerly. "Chink?"

"Oh, no," smiled Marcus.

"Honey, then?"

"Better than honey. I want to say to all of you that I'm trying to do my duty as Mr. Bird would have me. He was a good friend to me, and I think I know his wishes. He thought the world of Dick Barry, and I know he intended making him his heir. Maybe, though, without legal proof Dick Barry might not be able to hold his property?"

"Say!" cried Tom, jumping on a stool, "here is the one minute of my checkered career where I come in strong. Gentlemen, mates and fellows, in saving Dick from a snake to-day I busted the divining rod."

"That's you," criticised Elmer.

"Behold!" and Tom held out the two pieces, "the fragments. Behold!" and he turned up the ends, "it is hollow. Behold!" and he drew out the roll of paper, "a will made by old Aaron Bird two years ago!"

"Impossible!" cried Dick.

"No, for I saw it once!" exclaimed Marcus.

"Accept it," continued the oratorical Tom, with a flourish. "This is the proudest moment of my—"

"Life," supplemented Elmer, as Tom in his excitement tipped the stool over too far and came down with a bang.

"I couldn't do a thing gracefully if I tried," he muttered, arising from the ruins. "Well, never mind. We've got clear papers at last—eh, admiral?"

"A document," affirmed old Daffodil, exultantly, "that makes young cap'n a merchant prince, which, when said, make a note of."

"And now to reveal the secret of cache No. 8, the treasure of Badger Bay," spoke Dick to Marcus Thoms.

"Come on," said the latter, promptly, and all hands followed him.

Followed him by devious ways to a branch of the river they would never have been able to find alone.

Followed him past a shed filled with cordage, rigging, tar, oakum and paint pots—big, small and medium—to where a gently-rocking object seemed to beckon them to future fortune, and in it they found the surprise of their lives.

"It's a sloop!" cried old Daffodil, his face aglow with delight. "Full-rigged, steam appendix—oh, what a royal beauty!"

"It's yours, Dick Barry," said Marcus Thoms, simply, "because it was Mr. Bird's. He bought the hull equipped, but we painted and finished it. That has been my work here."

"Hurrah!" piped Elmer, lost in extravagant joy.

"Once more on the deck I stand of my own fair sailing craft!" yelled Tom, jumped too nimbly across the freshly-seamed planks and sat down promptly.

Dick was a little stunned with his good fortune. He did not say much, but only choked up as they inspected the stanch craft from keel to deck.

But when they got back to the gully hut he was all animation.

He declared that such a royal road to fortune had never before been mapped out for seven everyday boys—for he insisted in including faithful Marcus Thoms—and old Daffodil was the biggest boy of them all.

A new corporation was to be formed instanter—the Decatur Navigation Company—and seven equal shares were to be distributed to those who had helped him track-down old Aaron Bird's secret and evade the machinations of that once-dreaded enemy—the Lightning Bug.

Business boys, the work of getting the new sloop into perfect sailing trim, of removing the various cargoes that Bird's numerous caches and prospects would afford, was something to dream over, to calculate over, to be happy and industrious over.

The electric eye of science had helped bring them to this magnificent start in life.

Incidentally, however, there were other things revealed.

Not only had the Crookes tube delineated old Aaron Bird's chart, but boyish fidelity and devotion, honor clear as crystal, and friendship lasting as life, might also be included in what the X-rays told.

THE END.

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